



# Difficult Interactions

## About this Topic: Difficult Interactions

### Topic Mentor

#### Interaction Associates, LLC

[Interaction Associates, LLC](#), is a performance-improvement company offering a powerful suite of collaboration consulting and learning services. The company equips clients with practical new strategies, skills, and mindsets, so they can leverage the power of collaborative action to solve problems and create opportunities. Since 1969, Interaction Associates has helped global leaders, the *Fortune* 100, and government agencies to overcome their most difficult challenges.

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## What Would You Do?

### What would you do?

Brad doesn't know exactly when it will happen, but some day Terry is going to drive him over the edge. She spends hours reworking even the most routine tasks—and is sometimes late with a deliverable, which in turn affects Brad's scheduling. Also, she tends to take a critical look at group decisions—sometimes causing the group to revisit decisions already made. Still, Brad knows that when Terry takes on a complicated or difficult project, she will be thorough, intelligent, and persistent. Brad sees that Terry's hard work and critical attention to detail have made valuable contributions to the group, but Terry's careful approach clearly has an adverse effect on him. He is beginning to avoid her—and he senses she may be avoiding him. How can he approach Terry? Or should he approach her at all? He wouldn't be able to change her.

### What would you do?

If Brad is beginning to avoid Terry, it's time to sit down and talk with her. While Brad has a clear picture of what he thinks the problems are, he should find out how Terry perceives the situation. It's possible she sees things quite differently.

For example, perhaps her rework ultimately saves time. Or, maybe she revisits group decisions because she thinks they are rushed and not carefully thought through. Once Brad understands Terry's point of view and gets to the root cause of the situation, he can then move toward resolving their differences and improving their interactions. His

goal should not be to change her, but to change how they interact, which may mean changing his own behavior.

In this topic, you will learn how to manage difficult interactions more effectively, keep key employees on board, and help people who may not like each other to work together productively.

One key to success in your career is maintaining positive work relationships. But how do you handle interactions that are tense, strained, or difficult?

## Topic Objectives

This topic helps you:

- Decide which types of situations are worth investing time and energy to resolve
- Overcome barriers to action
- Identify the interpersonal differences that trigger difficult interactions
- Productively discuss the emotions that difficult interactions can raise
- Design solutions that satisfy your and the other party's most important interests and concerns
- Coach your direct reports to help them learn to resolve difficult interactions

## Examples of difficult interactions



You're arguing with a peer about why he consistently shoots down your ideas. Two of your employees routinely attack each other verbally during meetings. Your boss often makes sarcastic remarks to you and other managers. A customer keeps making unreasonable demands on your team.

These scenarios constitute **difficult interactions**. If you don't deal with them, they may escalate to highly undesirable outcomes—strained relationships, wasted time, and declining performance.

## Overcome barriers to action

You might avoid dealing with difficult interactions because certain barriers get in the way. The table below shows examples of these barriers and explains how to remove them so that you can more effectively manage difficult interactions.

Barrier	Ways to Remove
Fear of interpersonal conflict	Acknowledge that although conflict can be uncomfortable, it's a fact of life. Focus on the positive outcomes of addressing conflict.
Failure to recognize that you have a problem with another person in the workplace	Notice the quality of your workplace relationships. Ask which relationships seem tense, frustrating, or unproductive. Consider acknowledging that these relationships are hampered by difficult interactions.
The belief that a difficult interaction is the fault of others	Acknowledge your role in the difficulty. Identify what you can do to improve the situation.
The conviction that other people won't change even if you try to improve the situation	Remind yourself that you're not trying to change another person—rather, you want to alter the way the two of you interact. You can do that by changing your own behavior.
Desire to accept the status quo because you're not prepared to manage the outcome of the situation	Evaluate whether the risks of the difficult interaction are worth the benefits of an improved situation. If they are, map out a plan and carry it out.

The belief that the problem will resolve itself

Remind yourself that most problems don't resolve themselves.

Despite the challenges inherent in dealing with difficult interactions, it's essential to recognize situations that need addressing—and to manage them promptly and effectively. If you don't, difficult interactions may escalate to a level that destroys workplace relationships and damages performance in your team or unit.

## Improvement is possible

“ I always prefer to believe the best in everybody—it saves so much time. ”  
–Rudyard Kipling

Though managing difficult interactions is challenging, the rewards are well worth the effort. When you learn how to deal with these situations:

- Difficult conversations become easier to handle
- You prevent these situations from escalating into crises
- You engage in more productive conversations
- You feel greater freedom to take action in tough situations, as well as a stronger sense of self-respect
- You strengthen your workplace relationships

Managing difficult interactions requires hard work and practice. But you *can* master this important managerial responsibility. To do so, you need to:

- Understand the role of differences in difficult interactions
- Decide which difficult interactions require intervention and which can be let go
- Identify the facts in a tough situation
- Uncover the emotions raised by the situation
- Clarify concerns about self-image that a difficult interaction can raise
- Explore options for solving the problem, and implement the best solution

As a manager, you also need to know how to address difficult interactions among your direct reports.

## Differences in position and interests



Often, difficult interactions arise when two people have different **positions** (stances) and **interests** (desires) at stake concerning a particular **issue**.

Consider the following example, in which the issue at hand involves vacation time:

You oversee several teams, each of which has a leader. Randall, a team leader who's relatively new to the company, comes to you and complains about having less vacation time than the other team leaders. On this issue of vacation time, you and Randall have different positions and interests, as shown in the table below:

	Randall's	Yours
Position (stance)	"I should receive the same vacation as the other team leaders."	"You can have the same vacation when you have been here longer."
Interest (desire)	"I want to be treated fairly."	"I need you to be around to manage this large software implementation."

When two people go head to head over different positions or interests, tension and conflict can intensify. The more you can focus a difficult conversation on interests, the more likely it is that you can find a creative solution that at least partially satisfies both people's interests. In this case, for instance, you could propose to Randall that he take one more week of vacation but that he use the time as a series of long weekends rather than one contiguous week. That way, he knows he's being treated fairly, and you ensure that he's not away from the project for too long a stretch of time.

## Leadership Insight: Focus on interests

I'm struck by how often our disagreements are made worse because we get stuck on positions and we don't understand the interests that the other party has that underlie the positions. Let me give you an example of what I'm talking about. I was working with a team of senior executives who had responsibility for creating the strategic plan for their organization. They historically had done it as just the group of them together, and the previous year they tried something different. They'd asked employees to provide input into the plan.

Now it was time to write this year's strategic plan, and they had a real difference of opinion about how they were going to go about writing the plan this year. Were they going to do it the old way, the bottom up way, or the new way, the top-down way? There was a lot of dissention on the team about how this was going to work.

So they'd asked me to come in and help them work on this. And what I asked to do first was just to watch them have a conversation about it. It was a very interesting conversation, because everybody was talking at the same time. Nobody was listening to one another. They just kept repeating their positions over and over.

"We should do it top down." "We should do it bottom up." Over and over, and they even started to get personal and attack one another. The top downers called the bottom uppers irresponsible people who wanted to abdicate their responsibility for making the tough decisions that faced the firm. The bottom uppers called the top downers hierarchical and old fashioned dinosaurs. So they really were not making very much progress.

I asked them to halt that part of the conversation. And instead of advocating their points of view, just to inquire of one another, to try to understand why they felt so strongly about their points of view. What were the interests underlying their positions?

And it turned out their interests were not that far apart. The group that wanted to stick with the top down approach, their key interest was they wanted to avoid disappointing the employees again — because the previous year, when the employees had had input into the plan, a lot of employees thought that input meant that everything they suggested would be done. It wasn't, and they were disappointed. So the top downers wanted to avoid that.

The bottom uppers wanted to still capture the good ideas that they had gotten from employees the year before. They actually understood the concerns that the top downers had. In the end what they ended up doing was they ended up having the employees provide input, but this time they were very clear that the team itself would be designing the plan, and not every employee's suggestion would get done.

It was striking to me and I think this is the lesson that I took away from this — how just understanding the interests that underlie the position that your opponent has, if you take the time to do that, it creates a whole new space for you to actually have a conversation about what the solution should be.

When disagreements arise, examine closely your opponent's underlying motivations and interests—you may find new opportunities for a mutually agreeable solution.

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**President, The Grady Company**

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Before founding The Grady Company, Sharon was a consultant with Monitor and with Mercer Management Consulting, and served as Chief Operating Officer of Interaction Associates, a global provider of collaboration consulting and leadership education. She previously worked on Capitol Hill as a staff aide to U.S. Senator Abraham Ribicoff, and as press secretary to U.S. Congresswoman Barbara Kennelly.

Sharon holds a Bachelor of Arts in English from Wesleyan University and a Master of Business Administration from Harvard Business School. She studied Advanced Negotiation at Harvard Law School, is a trained mediator, and speaks fluent Spanish. Her Web site is [www.gradycompany.com](http://www.gradycompany.com).

## Differences in perceptions, motivations, and style

In addition to differences in positions and interests on a particular issue, other kinds of differences can spawn difficult interactions. The table below provides examples.

Difference	Example
Perceptions about what's critical	You view management's directives as more important than a team member does.
Motivations and intentions	You are motivated by quality, while a colleague is motivated by personal achievement.
Work style	You like to put all issues on the table at once, but your supervisor prefers to grapple with problems one at a time.
Communication style	You prefer to be updated about problems through written communication, while an employee finds it easier to update you by dropping by for an informal conversation.

## Differences in life experiences and cultural background

“A great many people think they are thinking when they are merely rearranging their prejudices.”

–William James



Differences in two people's cultural background, educational and professional experiences, gender, age, and race can also create misunderstandings and tensions in the workplace. The totality of each person's life experiences influences his or her assumptions about how the world should work and what can reasonably be expected from others.

When two individuals come from vastly different backgrounds and experiences, conflicts can arise over just about any situation in the workplace.

Consider the following example:

Stella is a 61-year-old manager in charge of a website development project. As the project unfolds, she begins to get a vague sense that some of her team members don't give enough consideration to her suggestions for managing the project. One day, she overhears one younger team member say to another, "You can't expect a near-retiree to really understand the web." In this case, age differences may have caused the younger team members to assume that, because of her age, Stella is incapable of managing a web project effectively; thus they don't fully accept her leadership or value the knowledge she brings to the project.

Unless she addresses this difficult situation, Stella will likely have problems leading her project team effectively.

## Difficult interactions among employees

A difficult interaction may stem from more than one interpersonal difference. It also may arise between any two individuals — supervisor and direct report, two peers, or several members of a department or team.

When such situations crop up between two of your direct reports — for example, several team members argue repeatedly over who's responsible for what tasks, or one employee accuses another of not being committed to a project — you need to take action quickly. Otherwise, your team's productivity may suffer.

Consider the most difficult interaction you're experiencing in your current role. What differences might be involved? How would you describe *your* position and interests regarding the issue at hand?

## Activity: Analyze differences

Finding the essential differences behind a difficult interaction is key to resolving that conflict. See if you can identify the differences that lie beneath employees' conflicts.

Dennis is having problems with his manager, Vishal. Vishal is a whirlwind of energy, always working on several projects at once. As a result, he expects Dennis to also multi-task. Although Dennis sees the importance of the work Vishal assigns him, he strongly prefers to stay focused on one project for long stretches of time. Furthermore, when Vishal asks Dennis for something, he rarely pauses to thank him for past work or to ask him if he needs assistance. What key difference does *not* underlie Dennis's problems with Vishal?

☐ Differences in perception

**Correct choice.** Dennis and Vishal agree on the importance of their work. They share the same priorities, although they have different preferred methods of managing their work.

- ☐ Differences in work style

**Not the best choice.** While Vishal prefers to tackle several tasks at once, Dennis prefers to work on one task at a time. This is a key difference underlying their conflict.

- ☐ Differences in communication style

**Not the best choice.** Vishal apparently does not spend much time on pleasantries. This is likely a difference in communication style. Vishal may prefer to get "straight to business" when talking about work matters.

Tina and Gerry work together in the sales department. Recently, their company announced that cutbacks may be necessary next year if sales revenues don't improve. Tina tends to keep a cool head under stress. However, her colleague Gerry is panicked, and can't understand why Tina doesn't seem to be concerned. In addition, Gerry and Tina disagree over which clients are worth pursuing, making things very strained between them.

What key difference does *not* underlie Tina's and Gerry's tension?

- ☐ Differences in perception

**Not the best choice.** Tina and Gerry disagree about which clients they should pursue.

- ☐ Differences in motivation

**Correct choice.** Tina and Gerry share a motivation: they want to increase company revenues to help reduce the possibility of layoffs.

- ☐ Differences in work style

**Not the best choice.** Tina's and Gerry's different reactions to high levels of stress are a significant cause of the tension between them.

Charles and David have worked well together for five years. They communicate readily and they approach group work in the same way, each working individually with brief sessions of collaboration. However, on their latest project, Charles finds himself becoming frustrated with David. David seems less willing to put in the extra effort that he used to and sometimes takes time off during regular work hours to take care of family obligations.

What key difference underlies Charles's frustration with David?

- ☐ Differences in perception

**Not the best choice.** Nothing in the scenario indicates that Charles and David perceived their goals for the current project differently.

- ☐ Differences in motivation

**Correct choice.** David has other motivations—meeting family obligations—that compete with his desire to put in extra effort at work.

- ☐ Differences in work style

**Not the best choice.** In the past, Charles's and David's work styles have meshed together very well. There is no indication that their work styles have changed.

- ☐ Differences in communication style

**Not the best choice.** Charles and David have communicated well in the past, and there is no indication that their communication styles have changed.

## Know what you're getting into



Managing difficult interactions takes time, patience, and energy. Thus, before you plunge into trying to address a tough situation with someone, it's useful to carefully consider several factors. Your primary aim is to invest your time and energy wisely—in situations that have the best chance of being improved.

For difficult interactions that you've decided are worth tackling, you'll need to master techniques for simultaneously getting at the facts behind the situation, understanding the emotions involved, and dealing with concerns about self-image that often accompany such situations.

## Key Idea: Ask whether the real conflict starts with you

### Key Idea

Sometimes difficult interactions with another person stem more from what's going on inside you than what's going on between you and the other person. In such instances, a discussion about the interaction may not yield any benefits.

For example, suppose you keep taking on several of your direct reports' problems rather than helping them learn how to solve them on their own. You find yourself working more and more overtime, and your real managerial work stacks up. You begin experiencing stress-related problems and feeling resentful toward these employees.

Are these difficult interactions that would benefit from a frank discussion? Perhaps not — if the reason you keep taking on direct reports' problems is that you fear being seen as incompetent or uncaring if you hand problems back to their rightful owners.

Instead of a lengthy, tense, and time-consuming discussion with your employees, you could instead honestly examine the motives behind your urge to solve employees' problems — and remind yourself of the importance of delegating as a managerial skill. In this case, changing your own attitudes and behaviors regarding delegating would likely improve your relationships with your employees far more than talking about the situation would. And it would take less time and energy.

When you have a conflict with a co-worker, constructive confrontation may be necessary. But what if the problem is only yours?

## Examine your motives

With some difficult interactions, you may feel tempted to simply let loose with your emotions. "After all," you might think to yourself, "at least I'm doing *something* to deal with the situation." But before you vent, ask yourself whether you're really just seeking short-term emotional relief instead of doing what's best for the long run.

Dumping all your negative feelings on someone who's irritated you for far too many months may get you some temporary relief and even prompt the person to change his or her ways . . . for a while. But you may have done so much damage in the process of venting that the relationship falls apart in the long run.

## Leadership Insight: Do a reality check

The first thing about difficult conversations is one of the things that drives them is running assumptions. People run assumptions instead of doing reality checks. So they think they know what the other person thinks and feels and they're preparing their response — usually either their defense or attack — based on that assumption. So the first tip is don't run assumptions, do a reality check. Find out what's really going on.

I worked for a boss once who would take things at face value. In fact, he heard something from somebody, and he was one of the worst examples of what not to do when you're trying to resolve a conversation or have a difficult conversation with someone. And he had heard that I had done something, and he said, "So, why did you do such and such?" And I was taken aback, because he had completely the wrong information. I immediately felt attacked.

Now, because I used emotional intelligence, it didn't escalate into something really bad. I said, "Let's just stop. Let me tell you what happened. Let me give you the information from my reality." But you need to be doing that in managing people. This is really, really important, and very often you'll have a reaction and the adrenaline starts going, and you're off in your mind. You've got to stop.

You check with the person. The way that you do a reality check is you say, "I got some information from a client of ours today that said that you hadn't produced the deliverables that we had agreed to, and I'd like to hear your reality. What's your experience of this, so I understand what's going on." Do the reality check.

You can ask questions. "So, why do you think the client might be upset? So you have this reality, the client has this one. Where do you think the disparity lies? What do you think went wrong? Is it in our communication? What do you think is happening?" So if you ask questions — that invites the other person to share the reality instead of attacking. So, don't run assumptions.

The second thing is, no matter what's going on emotionally, use a neutral tone. Really work hard to do what I call "emotional containment." That means I'm not talking about stuffing your emotions, I'm talking about containing them long enough to decide what you're going to do with them. Because the more you have a charged tone to your voice, you're either going to invoke a defensive reaction in the other person or a counterattack.

Really make that as monotone as you can no matter how upset you are. Saying to somebody, "I'm noticing, I'm really, really upset right now, and I want to stay calm and have a productive conversation, but it's really difficult because I'm so upset, and let me tell you why I'm upset."

Next tip. You use the "I" at the beginning of your sentence. "I experienced the comment that you made at the meeting that my marketing idea was pathetic as really demeaning. It may not have been your intention — maybe it just slipped out of your mouth — but I found it really, really upsetting. Then I got angry, and then I withdrew, and then I didn't want to have anything to do with you for the last two days because I didn't know how to deal with it. And I just really would appreciate if you would talk to me in a respectful way in the meetings, and I want us to have a good professional relationship and have a mutually respectful relationship."

As opposed to saying, "You accused me! You put me down in that meeting and that made me really angry," and, "Who do you think you are?" Because you're going to escalate the conflict, you're not going to diffuse it. Your goal is always around diffusing conflict.

Understand the difference between assertive communication and aggressive communication. Assertive is saying, "That report that you finished came in two days late, and I'm very disappointed and upset. Because I felt like we had an agreement that you were going to deliver it on my desk on Wednesday morning, and I felt let down. And I really need you to honor the agreements that you make. Because I need to know that you're going to deliver. I need to be able to count on you. It's really important."

As opposed to, "Well, you said you were going to deliver that on Wednesday morning, and where is it? What do I have to do, hold your hand while you do the report?" Of course they're going to feel attacked. You're going to lose your people. They are not going to be in your camp, so it's very important.

And the last thing I want to tell you is don't "should" on people. That's S H O U L D, by the way. Don't "should" on people. As soon as you start saying, "You should." And of course, the finger usually goes with it, you're going to lose people. They're going to shut down and get defensive. You can say things like, "Have you thought about doing such and such?" or "I wonder if calling the client on Wednesday might be good rather than waiting for them to call Friday. Let's let them know that we're really involved, we really want their business."

So, don't "should" on people. Even if you feel you know the answer of what they should be doing, you could say, "I'd really appreciate it if you could do such and such, " instead of, "You really should be doing such and such." Those are some concrete tips that can help you have those really tough conversations.

Be careful not to make assumptions based on incomplete information. Ask questions and invite others to share their perspectives.

**Lauren Mackler**  
**Executive Coach, Consultant and Author**

Lauren Mackler is an internationally renowned executive and life coach, bestselling author, and keynote speaker. Over the past 25 years she's been a psychotherapist, corporate executive, leader of Arthur Andersen's Human Capital consulting practice, and a leading authority in human behavior, leadership, and professional performance.

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Her work is frequently featured in the media, including CNN, FOX, the Wall Street Journal, the Huffington Post, the Daily Mail (London), the Boston Globe, and the Boston Business Journal. Contact Lauren at [www.laurenmackler.com](http://www.laurenmackler.com).

## Identify important relationships

It's always good to strive for positive working relationships. But your workplace relationships differ in importance. In deciding whether to deal with a difficult interaction, consider *how important* your relationship with that person is. Also consider *whether the relationship is long term or short term* and *how high the stakes are*. For example:

- **An important relationship**

If you're having difficulties with your supervisor's assistant because of differing work styles, and you need to interact with him daily on critical matters for a long time to come, that relationship has high priority. You will probably want to find ways to deal with him.

- **A not-so-important relationship**

If you have a problematic relationship with a colleague who's a member of a short-term, one-time project you're working on, you may decide not to invest the time and energy needed to improve the relationship. After all, once the project is over, you likely won't be working closely with that person again on such a high-stakes effort.

## Consider the potential for improvement

Suppose you're having prickly interactions with someone who is profoundly troubled emotionally or has a long history of destructive relationships with many people across a wide range of situations.

For example:

- Your new supervisor has a hair-trigger temper, and you've learned that all of your predecessors have left the company within three months of starting their jobs.
- An employee has a cruel sense of humor and repeatedly puts others down, no matter how often you try moving him to different teams.

- A colleague has let intractable personal problems destroy her performance on the job (including collaboration with peers on cross-functional projects) and has shown no willingness to get help.

In these cases, you may have little hope of improving the relationship in question. Instead, you will need to take a different course of action, such as:

- Arranging to report to someone else in the organization who isn't abusive, or leaving the company if you must report to an incurably abusive boss. If you don't want to leave your job, recognize that the situation may be beyond your ability or responsibility to address by yourself. Consider getting help from human resources or other professionals in your company who are charged with resolving such situations.
- Formally disciplining an employee who cannot learn to be respectful of others, and letting him go if disciplinary action doesn't lead to improvement. If you select this course, ensure that you follow company policies regarding documenting an employee's poor performance or behavior and letting an employee go.
- Finding ways to avoid working on projects with a troubled colleague whom you can't count on to carry out her team responsibilities. If a new team is being assembled to handle a particular project, and the colleague is a member, consider whether you need to be on the team. If your participation isn't crucial, avoid joining.

Such actions require the ability to let go of the problematic situation and the feelings associated with it, and to accept that the relationship itself can't be improved.

Whatever criteria you use for deciding whether to confront someone about a difficult interaction, remember that you can't force someone to change his or her attitudes or behaviors. All you can do is try to improve the relationship by changing the way *you* behave and the way you and the other person interact.

## Activity: Pick the right course of action

There are some issues you should address directly with coworkers. Some others should only be discussed with a superior or human resources manager. And still others should, to the best of your ability, be ignored. Can you tell the difference?

A coworker begins putting up some posters in his cubicle that you think are an eyesore.

- ☐ Address the issue

**Not the best choice.** "Let it pass" is the correct choice. Inevitably, some of your coworkers will have habits and quirks that annoy you a little. In the long run, it's usually better to let these things go, since confronting people over them may create more strife than the issue warrants.

- ☐ Let it pass

**Correct choice.** Inevitably, some of your coworkers will have habits and quirks that annoy you a little. In the long run, it's usually better to let these things go, since confronting people over them may create more strife than the issue warrants.

- ☐ Discuss with human resources

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Your supervisor consistently makes sarcastic remarks about you and your ability to do your job.

- ☐ Address the issue

**Not the best choice.** "Discuss with human resources" is the correct choice. If someone you work with is treating you in an abusive manner or engaging in unfair practices, you need to discuss it with someone higher up. Consider getting help from human resources or other professionals in your company who are charged with resolving such situations.

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A member of your project team maintains odd working hours, which makes it more difficult for you to get your work done on time.

- ☐ Address the issue

**Correct choice.** If you and your coworker will continue to work together on projects, you'll need to address the issue with that coworker and try to reach a compromise.

- ☐ Let it pass

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You have repeatedly seen a coworker deliberately falsifying important paperwork.



- ☐ Address the issue

**Not the best choice.** "Discuss with human resources" is the correct choice. If a coworker is engaged in unethical or legally questionable behavior, you need to discuss the issue with someone of authority in your company.

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- ☐ Discuss with human resources

**Correct choice.** If a coworker is engaged in unethical or legally questionable behavior, you need to discuss the issue with someone of authority in your company.

A member of your project team, who is leaving the company at the end of the month, tends to be needlessly aggressive in criticizing others' ideas.

- ☐ Address the issue

**Not the best choice.** "Let it pass" is the correct choice. This situation would typically warrant a discussion. However, if the person causing the problem will not be around for long, it's just as well to save the time and emotional energy you would invest in addressing the problem.

- ☐ Let it pass

**Correct choice.** This situation would typically warrant a discussion. However, if the person causing the problem will not be around for long, it's just as well to save the time and emotional energy you would invest in addressing the problem.

- ☐ Discuss with human resources

**Not the best choice.** "Let it pass" is the correct choice. This situation would typically warrant a discussion. However, if the person causing the problem will not be around for long, it's just as well to save the time and emotional energy you would invest in addressing the problem.

The person who works at the desk next to yours does a lot of work over the phone, which is very distracting for you.

- ☐ Address the issue

**Correct choice.** If a situation is causing your work to suffer, it needs to be addressed. In this case, you and your coworker might be able to make an arrangement that allows you both to get your work done without hindering each other.

- ☐ Let it pass

**Not the best choice.** "Address the issue" is the correct choice. If a situation is causing your work to suffer, it needs to be addressed. In this case, you and your coworker might

be able to make an arrangement that allows you both to get your work done without hindering each other.

- ☐ Discuss with human resources

**Not the best choice.** "Address the issue" is the correct choice. If a situation is causing your work to suffer, it needs to be addressed. In this case, you and your coworker might be able to make an arrangement that allows you both to get your work done without hindering each other.

You feel that the leader of your project group doesn't give a full hearing to your ideas in meetings.

- ☐ Address the issue

**Correct choice.** Your relationship with your supervisor is important to you, so it is appropriate to try to resolve this issue. Before approaching your supervisor, ask yourself how you may be contributing to the problem. Do other people bring up new ideas at group meetings? If not, group meetings might not be the appropriate venue for introducing new ideas.

- ☐ Let it pass

**Not the best choice.** "Address the issue" is the correct choice. Your relationship with your supervisor is important to you, so it is appropriate to try to resolve this issue. Before approaching your supervisor, ask yourself how you may be contributing to the problem. Do other people bring up new ideas at group meetings? If not, group meetings might not be the appropriate venue for introducing new ideas.

- ☐ Discuss with human resources

**Not the best choice.** "Address the issue" is the correct choice. Your relationship with your supervisor is important to you, so it is appropriate to try to resolve this issue. Before approaching your supervisor, ask yourself how you may be contributing to the problem. Do other people bring up new ideas at group meetings? If not, group meetings might not be the appropriate venue for introducing new ideas.

## Two sides to every story



In any difficult interaction, the two people involved see the *facts* of the situation from unique angles. To begin to resolve a particular difficult interaction, you need to explore these facts through frank discussion.

You're probably familiar with the maxim that says that there are two sides to every story. The same is true for difficult interactions: Each person involved views the situation based on a specific set of facts that are important for him or her.

To lay the groundwork for resolving a problem, each person needs to understand which facts are influencing the other person's perspective. That takes communication. The guidelines introduced in this section can help.

## Key Idea: Share and explain your impressions of what's going on

### Key Idea

Terry reports to Brad. Suppose that she keeps submitting project reports late even though Brad has repeatedly complained and insisted that Terry complete the reports on time. But the more Brad complains and insists, the more annoyed Terry gets.

To get at the facts, Brad and Terry each need to explain their side of the story, including the situation's impact on them. Brad should share the facts as he perceives them.

For example, he could say, "When you send in reports late, I end up doing a lot of extra work to compensate. I have to spend two hours filling out paperwork myself. I also have to explain to the other team members that the information they need will be coming late. That throws the whole project behind schedule."

Terry should then explain the facts as she sees them.

She might say, "I've been really stressed out lately, because I've had a bunch of new prototypes to evaluate, and they've all had problems. I couldn't seem to get to the project reports. When you continually complain about the late reports, I get the impression that you don't care about how well the prototypes are handled."

The next step is for Brad to stop and think about what may have caused him to see the situation as he does. He should consider information he's gathered in the past, previous experiences, and assumptions about what's important. Then he should share this information with Terry, and ask her to do the same. Brad should share his previous experiences.

For example, he could say, "The last time I led a project of this complexity, we had real problems during implementation after we stopped circulating weekly updates to everyone." He could then share information with Terry by adding, "This worries me, because I recently read an article saying that poor team communication is often the cause behind failed projects." Finally, Brad should share his assumptions about what is important. "In my view, we don't stand a chance of breaking into the new market we've identified unless we can successfully carry out our projects."

Terry should reciprocate by also sharing information, previous experiences, and her assumptions about what is important.

For example, she might say, "The latest speech by our CEO made me realize that we've got to accelerate the product prototyping process. I've learned from last year's projects that when you have to make a choice between filling out paperwork and getting the actual work done, it's better to focus on the work. The paperwork can always be done later."

By sharing the information, experiences, and assumptions behind your view of the difficult situation, you and the other person begin understanding each other — essential to resolving problems.

Sharing your own perspective is a key step to resolving conflict. Here's a demonstration of how it's done.

## Explore your intentions

When a difficulty arises, clarify with the other person what your intentions have been during the difficult exchanges you've had together.

For instance:

**Brad:** I've been trying to make sure that everyone on the project team gets the information they need to handle the tasks they're accountable for, on time. That's the only way we can keep the overall project on schedule.

**Terry:** I figured that by focusing on accelerating the prototyping process, we could prevent bottlenecking in the early stages of the product-development cycle. If the process gets held up in the beginning of the cycle, the rest of the cycle is going to be in trouble, too — and the whole thing will end up delayed.

When you compare intentions, you may (as in this case) discover that you both have similar aims and priorities. At the very least, you may realize that each of you has perfectly admirable intentions, even if they differ. In either case, you each will likely conclude that the other person isn't deliberately trying to make life difficult!

## Acknowledge your contributions to the problem

Most difficult interactions aren't one person's fault; both parties have played some part in the problem. To create a sense of ownership for resolving the issue, honestly acknowledge what you've done to

contribute to the problem. Ask the other person to do the same.

For example:

**Brad:** I think that by constantly complaining about late reports, I gave you the impression that I didn't care about the prototyping process.

**Terry:** I can see that by letting the project updates slip, I caused you to question whether the project overall would stay on schedule.

In the process of uncovering the facts, you'll want to also pay attention to the emotions behind the difficult situation and to the concerns about self-image that arise during your attempts to resolve the situation.

## The price of suppressing emotions



Difficult interactions trigger powerful emotions in the people involved. Yet those feelings may differ dramatically from person to person — even in the same situation.

In dealing with a series of difficult exchanges with someone, you and the other person need to identify and express the emotions you're experiencing.

If feelings are ignored or suppressed during a difficult conversation, they can come out in other ways — such as body posture, facial expressions, and long pauses. They can also make it difficult for the participants to listen to one another. If such emotions become extremely intense, the people involved may simply avoid each other, because the unresolved feelings seem so threatening.

But expressing your emotions involves more than just venting. How to identify and productively share emotions during a tough situation? The following steps can help.

## Identify your emotions

Sometimes identifying the emotions you're experiencing because of a difficult interaction can be difficult. For one thing, you may have trouble putting labels on your emotions. If so, consider the following terms for negative feelings — and work to develop your "feelings vocabulary":

Impatience	Frustration	Anger

Annoyance	Jealousy	Disappointment
Rage	Fear	Anxiety
Sadness	Shame	Worry
Defensiveness	Derision	Skepticism
Betrayal	Hurt	Bewilderment
Confusion	Self-doubt	Loneliness
Embarrassment	Self-consciousness	Nervousness

You may also have difficulty identifying your emotions if you tend to "hide" them in other comments during a prickly discussion with someone else. The table below shows examples.

If you said . . .	You may be . . .	And you may be feeling . . .
"The solution is for you to get these tasks done within budget."	Rushing to solve the problem	Fear that you won't get funding for a subsequent project
"You're unbelievably apathetic."	Characterizing the other person	Disappointment that the other person seems uncommitted to the work
"You should have supported my proposal at the meeting."	Making judgments about how a peer is supposed to behave	Betrayed by a colleague who you thought backed your ideas

"Why did you ignore my memo about the new strategy?"

Making an attribution about someone else's intent

Self-doubt about your leadership abilities

By expanding your feelings vocabulary and detecting hidden emotions, you can more easily identify the feelings you're experiencing in a difficult interaction.

## Leadership Insight: Anger is tricky

Anger is tricky. A lot of people are not comfortable expressing anger. A lot of people think it's not appropriate to express anger in the workplace. I actually disagree. I think that if you're angry at somebody that you work with and your relationship with them is important, and your anger is getting in the way of your ability to work productively with them, you have to find a way to talk about the anger. And I think there are good ways and not-so-good ways.

I was working with a team once where I saw anger expressed in a not especially good way that I'll tell you about, and then what they did to kind of turn it around. It was a group of executives who were working together on a special project and they came together and they had a meeting where they presented their results to the board and asked for the next phase of the project to be funded.

And the meeting happened on a Monday evening, and I happened to have a meeting with this group on Tuesday morning. So when I walked in on Tuesday morning into the meeting room, what I saw were a lot of very ashen faced quiet people, and two of the eight of them literally yelling at one another. And one of them was saying, "I can't believe you didn't come to the meeting last night. That was so irresponsible of you. I'm tired of having to pick up for you and do your work all the time. You're a terrible team player."

And the other person was giving as good as he had gotten. And it turned out that I was doing some work with one of the two people that was having this exchange, his name was Greg, and he was the one who had been at the meeting, and it turned out he'd had to do some presenting of the other person, Wayne's, materials and hadn't felt comfortable about that. That's why he was so angry.

So, after this large meeting, Greg and I had a conversation about: what was a way that he could have had that conversation with Wayne more productively and expressed his anger. And he went back that same day and he talked to Wayne. And first, he started out by apologizing for yelling, and then he got around to talking about his anger.

And he said, "You know what, I wish I had said to you, 'Wayne, when you didn't come to the meeting last night I was really angry. I felt that it now fell on us, the rest of the team, to present material that really it was your place to present. I was uncomfortable presenting it. I don't know it like you do. I felt embarrassed, and I was worried about whether or not the presentation would go well being done by someone who didn't know the material like you did. And what I would like to ask of you in the future is that if you can't make a meeting or a presentation, please, would you send somebody else in your place from your department who knows the material and can answer the board's questions. How would you feel about that?'"



And that was so much of a better approach. It really was the start of a good conversation between the two of them and what made it so much better than the first way that he expressed his anger, was two things. One, he made a clear request. If I'm just angry and yelling at you, it's hard for you to know what to do with that, but when I make a request of you, there's an opportunity there for you to try to do something to make it better.

The second thing he did, that was so useful, was he didn't make Wayne responsible for his anger. He didn't say, "Wayne, you made me angry by not coming last night." He simply said, "When you didn't come, I felt angry," which that format, when you did X, I felt Y, is a much more productive way to express your anger, and it worked out very well for the two of them.

Too much conflict and disagreement damages productivity and lowers morale. But there are techniques managers can use to create conditions for more constructive behavior.

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Before founding The Grady Company, Sharon was a consultant with Monitor and with Mercer Management Consulting, and served as Chief Operating Officer of Interaction Associates, a global provider of collaboration consulting and leadership education. She previously worked on Capitol Hill as a staff aide to U.S. Senator Abraham Ribicoff, and as press secretary to U.S. Congresswoman Barbara Kennelly.

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## Rethink destructive emotions

Just because you feel an emotion doesn't mean you can't change it. With some careful thought, you can minimize or even dissolve destructive feelings. Consider these techniques:

- **Explore the other person's intentions and facts:** If you discover that your employee had good intentions and legitimate reasons when he decided not to show up at a weekly meeting, your annoyance may fade away.
- **Examine your contributions to the problem:** If you realize that you've advised employees to focus more on completing a project than filling out paperwork, your frustration over late reports may lose its edge.
- **Ask what assumptions are causing your feelings:** If you find you've mistakenly assumed that a colleague values product quality as much as you do, you may feel less anger over her tendency to take quality-control shortcuts.



When emotions prove destructively intense, consider easing them by examining and changing your thinking. You'll be better able to deal with the difficult interaction at hand.

## Express your emotions

After rethinking destructive emotions, describe the feelings you're experiencing as a result of the difficult situation. Your goal is to express your complete range of emotions—without judging or blaming the other person.

Here's an example:

"I'm not sure this makes sense, but when you ignored my memo, I felt doubts about my ability to lead this team. Then I started feeling worried that the project would fail. I found myself getting frustrated over not being able to move the work forward."

## Invite the other person to identify emotions

You can help the other person identify and describe his or her emotions as well. For example:

- **Explore hints:** "You mentioned an interest in being promoted. I wonder if you're angry because I got the project and you didn't."
- **Ask questions:** "What else might be bothering you about this situation?"
- **Offer observations:** "You're not looking me in the eye. Are you feeling embarrassed about how the presentation went?"

## Address feelings about self-image



While discussing difficult interactions with another person, you may begin feeling that your perceptions about yourself are called into question.

For example, suppose a direct report says, "I didn't attend the meeting because I didn't think you valued my ideas." In response, you wonder to yourself, "Maybe I'm not a competent manager after all."

For many people, the sense that their self-image is being challenged creates intense emotions.

It's vital to address feelings about self-image — in yourself and the other person — during tough conversations. Why? These emotions can become overwhelming — making it virtually impossible to converse productively about *any* subject.

## Leadership Insight: A question of integrity

It's 1996. I'm a junior associate working on an acquisition. And we're working overnight to get all of the documents printed so that the parties can sign them in the following morning. Around 8:00 a.m. the following morning, not having slept, we welcomed the buyer and his lawyers into the conference room and we very proudly show them all of the documents: "Look at the great work we have done. We've printed everything for you. It is ready for you to sign. You can sign it, and be out for lunch." Well, the CFO turns to his lawyer and says, "Well, and how do I even know that the documents that they've printed are the same documents that we agreed to last night?"

So, I am 22 years old. I haven't slept. I am a junior associate, and here is this CFO of a very powerful Brazilian company basically questioning my ethics and saying, implying, that I could have played around with the documents overnight.

I was enraged but didn't know what to do. But before I had to do anything, his lawyer turned to him and said, "Well, you basically trust that these people did their work. It's an established law firm and they would never play around with the documents. So relax."

The CFO turns back to him and says, "Well, you don't know that. So we are just going to sit down and read all of these documents again." The lawyer turns to him and says, "Well, I am not doing that. If you want to sit down and embarrass yourself, feel free to do so. I will not do that. I know these people. I am confident that the documents are fine."

So the CFO sits there for a while, flips a few pages. I mean, how many pages can he read of a document that you have to sign in 10 minutes? And he ends up signing everything.

I never mentioned it to that guy, but I was really grateful for him standing up to his client to basically defend me and my law firm. And from that, I learned that it is very important to show appreciation for other people's work, and that you should not really question someone else's behavior without cause.

And the really great thing was that 15 years later, I was now a partner at my law firm working with that same lawyer on another deal. And in an afternoon, the junior associate that was helping me on that deal storms into my room saying, "Well, they are about to print all of their documents all alone in their law firm. So I am going there right now because I have to make sure that they print it right. And how do I know, after all, that they are not going to play around with the documents?"

So I told him, "Well, you are not going anywhere. Sit down and let me tell you a story about that guy and the appreciation that he showed for me 15 years ago." And it really did feel great, even without him knowing, to return some of that appreciation a few years later.

When our self image is threatened, a common reaction is to react defensively. Managers can prevent these situations from escalating into crises by modeling positive behaviors such as patience and trust.

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He has more than 15 years' experience representing Brazilian and international clients in the structuring, negotiating, and financing of mergers, acquisitions, and private equity investments. Alvaro has also had significant experience representing clients in the development, financing, construction, and operation of major renewable energy (ethanol, wind, and small hydro) projects in Brazil.

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## Where self-image comes from

Your self-image comes from many different assumptions that you've made about yourself.

Here are just a few examples:

- "I'm an effective manager."
- "I'm a good person."
- "I care about my employees."
- "I'm committed to my company's success."
- "I'm loyal."

Not surprisingly, it's probably very important to you to continue seeing yourself in these terms. After all, few people like to view themselves in a negative light—as incompetent, uncaring, or disloyal.

## Why self-image can be threatened

“ No one can make us feel inferior without our consent. ”  
–Eleanor Roosevelt

Despite the desire to think of themselves in positive terms, many people view their self-image from an "*either/or*" mindset: "I'm either loyal or disloyal," "I'm either caring or uncaring," and so forth. The problem with this mindset is that it makes it impossible for people to tolerate criticism and negative feedback from others.

For instance, if a colleague says, "I was really disappointed when you didn't support my proposal," you might conclude, "I can't possibly be a loyal person if I don't support my peer's ideas." If deciding that you're disloyal feels intolerable, you may practice *denial* instead—and shoot back with something like, "I *did* support your proposal; I don't know why you feel that way."

Other reactions to self-image challenges include:

- **Burying the feelings** and resorting to generalizations, abstractions, and a detached manner: "Let's calm down and establish precise standard operating procedures here."
- **Striking back** at the other person defensively: "Are you calling me a liar?!"
- **Refusing to face the disagreement** directly or take a stand: "Oh, who knows what's going on here . . . ? Anyway, did you see Tom's article in the newsletter yesterday?"

None of these reactions enables a person to listen to negative feedback and make the changes needed to improve the way he or she interacts with others.

## Handle threats to your self-image

Several strategies can help you effectively handle challenges to your self-identity:

- **Understand your self-image.** List all the assumptions that influence your self-image. Ask yourself which of these assumptions evoke the strongest feelings. These are the assumptions that will most likely trigger a feeling of threat to your self-image if they're called into question during a difficult conversation. By anticipating that you might experience anxiety or defensiveness over these elements of your self-image, you may be better able to control those feelings if they do arise.
- **Adopt a "both/and" mindset.** Instead of assuming that you can be *either* competent *or* incompetent, remind yourself that you—and everyone else—are much more complex than that. Each person is a mix of positive and negative qualities, and no one is *always* anything. You're likely competent at some things and not so skilled at others. It's appropriate to feel good about many aspects of yourself and ambivalent about many others.
- **Accept imperfection.** Acknowledge that everyone makes *mistakes* at times. Everyone also has complicated *motivations*. For instance, perhaps you genuinely wanted to expedite a project by taking a delegated task back from an employee who couldn't seem to handle it. But deep down, you also knew that this action would let you communicate your frustration—without having to experience an uncomfortable discussion. So, you had admirable and not-so-admirable motives.

## Key Idea: Help others with self-image threats

### Key Idea

Just as you need to deal with perceived threats to your self-image during a difficult exchange, so does the other person. You can help him or her manage anxiety about self-image by raising the issue explicitly. For example:

- **Admit your own self-image concerns:** Such as, "I tend to be sensitive to criticisms about my leadership style. But I know I need your feedback. So bear with me if I seem to be getting a bit defensive." By openly acknowledging your own anxieties about self-image, you may make it easier for the other person to do the same.
- **Ask questions about self-image:** Like, "I'm sensing that this situation is about whether you're committed to this project. Is that how you're seeing it, too?"
- **View the other person as human, too:** Remind yourself that he or she makes mistakes and has complex motivations. Practice both, and think about the other person—for example, acknowledge in your own mind that he or she is neither completely competent nor utterly incompetent, neither totally caring about the project nor completely uncaring, and so forth.

By acknowledging concerns about self-image and helping others deal with them, you can more easily discuss unproductive behaviors—and change them to improve the quality of your interactions.

Conflict resolution requires an awareness of other people's self-images as well as your own. How can you show empathy for other people's self-image anxieties?

## Have a focused conversation



You've had some preliminary conversations with someone about the difficult interactions plaguing your working relationship. And you've agreed that you want to improve things. Now it's time to conduct a conversation specifically geared to solving the problem. There are many ways to have this conversation. The approaches below will help you craft an enduring solution—rather than a one-time, temporary fix.

## Activity: Assess your discussion process

Consider a conversation or conversations you have had with someone in the workplace attempting to address tension or conflict between you. Use this assessment to see how well you did.

Answer each of the following fifteen questions "yes" or "no." Record your answer to each question manually as you go.

During a conversation, the other person and I have . . .

1. Discussed our differing interests in the issue at hand.
2. Acknowledged other differences, such as work or communication styles, motivations, perceptions about what's critical, and experiential and cultural backgrounds.
3. Agreed that we want to improve matters between us.
4. Shared our impressions of what's going on and the reasons behind our impressions.
5. Described the emotions we're experiencing as a result of our difficulties.
6. Acknowledged concerns about self-image that have cropped up because of the difficulty.
7. Acknowledged that no one is perfect and that everyone makes mistakes.
8. Demonstrated active listening with one another; for instance, by asking questions, paraphrasing, and not interrupting.
9. Resisted the urge to blame, accuse, or judge one another.

10. Stated our individual contributions to the problem.
11. Found ways to defuse intense emotions; for example, by taking breaks and then returning to the discussion.
12. Framed the discussion in terms of differences, not character flaws.
13. Focused on differing perceptions, not presumed truths.
14. Worked to identify emotions hidden behind any accusations or judgments.
15. Worked to remove barriers to our ability to deal with the difficulty—such as fear of conflict or the belief that the problem will resolve itself.

Tally your score, giving yourself one point for each "yes" answer, and select it from the options below.

☐ 0-6

**Not the best choice.** You may not be handling your difficult interactions as effectively as possible. Think about the questions to which you responded "No." What actions might you take in a subsequent conversation with this person to improve your skills at managing the difficulty?

☐ 7-11

**Not the best choice.** You are handling difficult interactions pretty well. However, there is room for improvement. Think about the questions to which you responded "No." What actions might you take in a subsequent conversation with this person to improve your skills at managing the difficulty?

☐ 12-15

**Not the best choice.** You seem to be handling your difficult interactions very well. Recall the last conversation in which you tried to address a difficult interaction. What was the result? Has the interaction improved since then?

## Continue framing the problem productively

As you discuss the difficulties between you, keep framing the problem in productive ways. The following table contrasts effective and ineffective framing and shows examples.

Framing Principle	What to Say	What Not to Say
Describe your difficulties as differences	"Joan, it seems you've been	"Joan, you don't seem to care about



between you, not character flaws.	emphasizing the importance of staying within budget on this project. I've been assuming that meeting the interim deadlines is our top priority."	keeping this project on schedule. You keep missing the interim deadlines we've established."
Focus on perceptions, not presumed truths.	"Larry, to my mind, achieving the quality levels we've established means producing error-free reports."	"Larry, we've got to aim for zero mistakes in the reports we're producing. That's what quality is all about."
Emphasize contributions, not blame.	"Sarah, I've played my own part in this problem—by neglecting to let you know my priorities."	"Sarah, you're the one who didn't understand the importance of formatting the proposal in the right way."
Communicate feelings, not accusations.	"Peter, I feel frustrated when you don't do what you said you would do for the project team."	"Peter, you've really made me angry; you can't be relied on follow through with commitments."

Keep sharing and listening

“ In the middle of every difficulty lies opportunity. ”  
–Albert Einstein

As you converse, continue sharing your viewpoint and listening to understand the other person's perspective. Apply these practices:

- **Sharing:** Cite the experiences, motivations, and emotions that are influencing your perceptions of the problem. Reaffirm your commitment to improving the relationship. Make it clear that you view the other person as a partner in the process of addressing the difficulties between you.
- **Listening:** Ask questions to probe for more information from the other person about his or her experiences, motivations, emotions, and perceptions. Use paraphrasing to test your understanding of what you're hearing. Acknowledge the feelings behind any accusations or criticisms you hear.

Your goal in sharing and listening is to piece together a picture of how the two of you got into the difficult situation.

## Develop and implement a plan for change

To craft an effective plan for change, explore potential solutions that satisfy each side's differing concerns and interests.

Here's how Matt, a manager, resolved a difficulty with Brenda, a direct report:

**Matt:** We've had our ongoing differences about whether it's worth making these product demos. You know I've never understood why it takes so long to get them out—and why they're so expensive.

**Brenda:** Well, we want to get it right. So we consult with all the parties involved. We hold focus groups and then go through several rounds of review, sometimes up to five rounds, so we can produce the best product demo possible.

**Matt:** Aha. I think we have different perceptions about what's critical. You're focusing on quality, which I understand. But I'm looking at the bottom line. I'd rather get a very good—and cost-effective—demo out in a timely manner than shoot for perfection.

**Brenda:** How good is "very good"?

**Matt:** Good enough for customers to get a clear and compelling sense of the product. Let me ask you this: How valuable are the focus groups?

**Brenda:** Hard to evaluate. People do disagree about their value. Sometimes we really need to find something out, and other times, it's more standard routine.

**Matt:** And the reviews? When do you stop getting critical feedback and start getting feedback—you know—to change a single word or use a slightly different color?

**Brenda:** I'd say, round four.

**Matt:** So, how about holding focus groups only when there is a clear need—and cutting the number of reviews to three? Would we end up with a quality that you could feel comfortable with?



**Brenda:** Yes. I think I could live with that.

As with all action plans, you need to clarify how you'll carry out your plan for managing a difficult situation with another person. That way, you can help ensure that the solution you've developed resolves the problem you've identified. Keep these principles in mind as you discuss ways to implement the plan:

- Determine how you'll measure success. In Matt's and Brenda's case, they might decide to measure progress by comparing the number of focus groups held for the current demo against the number held for previous demos—to ensure that fewer focus groups are held. They might also check whether the number of reviews is in fact cut down to three, as they agreed. And they might determine how to assess demo quality—for example, by the number of questions that customers have after using a demo.
- Decide how you'll communicate going forward. Will you meet once a week to discuss how things are going and make necessary changes to the action plan? Will you check with each other daily by phone or email? How will you handle any tension that arises during these discussions? Will you establish ground rules, such as "No blaming or character judgments allowed"?

## Key Idea: Decide whether to intervene

### Key Idea

When conflicts arise among your employees, you should consider carefully whether to play an active role in helping the parties involved resolve disputes. As a manager, you can coach your direct reports so that they learn how to manage difficult interactions themselves.

In some cases you may also decide to intervene directly in a conflict between your employees. Many experts suggest that if a dispute does not interfere with an employee's performance, does not disrupt the work environment, and doesn't violate company policy, then "benign neglect" may be your best approach. Not intervening gives your direct reports an opportunity to work out their conflicts and meld into a high-performing unit, as well as strengthen their problem-solving skills.

You *should* intervene when conflicts disrupt the work environment or hamper productivity. Intervention is also crucial when:

- A disagreement erupts between an assertive employee and a timid person, or the two individuals are of unequal rank.
- An argument between two direct reports has broadened to encompass additional staff members.
- The dispute has escalated into a personal vendetta.
- One or both of those involved asks for your assistance.

Of course, if the conflict involves illegal conduct, such as sexual harassment or civil rights violations, it goes far beyond the definition of difficult interactions. In such cases, you need to consult the appropriate resources (typically your company's HR or legal department) to handle the situation.

As a manager, you should empower direct reports to resolve their own conflicts. But how do you decide when things have gone too far, and you need to step in?

*NOTE:* If a conflict involves illegal conduct, such as sexual harassment or civil rights violations, it goes far beyond the definition of difficult interactions. In such cases, you need to consult the appropriate resources (typically your company's HR or legal department) to handle the situation.

## Facilitate resolution

When you've identified an inter-employee conflict that merits your intervention, consider using the following process to facilitate resolution:

1. Help the individuals involved define the problem in specific, observable terms. Encourage them to describe the accompanying emotions, motivations, and viewpoints.
2. Ensure that each person listens carefully to the other. Model paraphrasing and other active-listening skills to demonstrate how this is done.
3. Help the disputants identify areas of agreement. For example, perhaps both people do have a project's best interests at heart, but they have different views about how best to carry out the work.
4. Encourage the disputants to brainstorm alternative solutions. Evaluate how well the proposed solutions satisfy their concerns and issues.
5. Suggest that the two create a problem-resolution plan. Help them to create and get started with the plan if necessary.
6. Schedule future meetings during which the individuals involved will discuss, under your guidance, how things are going and whether the solution is working.

## Activity: Help resolution happen

When a conflict arises between two of your employees, you must help facilitate a resolution. There are multiple steps that must be taken when solving employee conflict. What should you do first?

Everyone in the office has noticed the tension between Ben and Gordon. It has become even more of a problem since the two were assigned to work on the same project. Their inability to work together effectively is slowing things down and making you, the project manager, concerned about meeting deadlines.

You call Ben and Gordon into your office to attempt to clear the air between them. What is the first thing you should do?

- ☐ Encourage Ben and Gordon to talk about shared work values and areas of agreement between them

**Not the best choice.** Before Ben and Gordon talk about areas where they agree, it needs to be clear where they disagree, as this is the core of the dispute between them.

- ☐ Ask Ben and Gordon to take turns articulating the problem between them, as they see each see it

**Correct choice.** The first step in resolving a conflict is for each party to describe the conflict as he or she sees it. Ask each person to describe their motivations, emotions, and viewpoints as he or she talks about the problem.

- ☐ Give Ben and Gordon a plan for working together smoothly in the future

**Not the best choice.** Before any plan for working together is formed, Ben and Gordon need to clearly articulate the problem between them.

Ben and Gordon describe the problem individually. Gordon's complaint is that while Ben frequently comes up with interesting ideas, he is not particularly detail-oriented. This means Gordon has to work extra hard when his work depends on Ben's. Ben, on the other hand, feels that Gordon is a good worker but that he diminishes the group's momentum by being "negative" about new ideas.

What should you do next?

- ☐ Ask Ben and Gordon to articulate their understanding of each other's viewpoint

**Correct choice.** Before moving on to the next step, you need to make sure that Ben and Gordon have listened to each other closely. One of the best ways to do this is to have them repeat each other's positions aloud.

- ☐ Have Ben and Gordon propose ideas for a compromise between the two of them

**Not the best choice.** It's still too early in the process to propose solutions. First, you need to make sure that Ben and Gordon have understood each other and found some common ground.

- ☐ Tell Ben and Gordon to return to your office tomorrow, by which time you will have a resolution plan for them

**Not the best choice.** It is still too early in the process to propose solutions. And, it is better if Ben and Gordon reach a point where they can propose their own solution rather than waiting for you to suggest a solution.

Ben and Gordon articulate their understandings of each other's viewpoint. After a little discussion, each feels that the other has an accurate impression of his point of view.

What should you do next?

- ☐ End the meeting, trusting that their conflict will fade away now that they understand each other

**Not the best choice.** Although establishing understanding and empathy is the start of conflict resolution, it is not the end. Ben and Gordon still need a plan for working together effectively.

- ☐ Have them discuss priorities and values that they share

**Correct choice.** Now that Ben and Gordon understand their disagreement better, they need to find some common ground on which they can propose a solution.

- ☐ Brainstorm ways to resolve the conflict with Ben and Gordon

**Not the best choice.** There is still a little more work to do before proposing any solutions. Ben and Gordon know their areas of disagreement; now they must explore their areas of

agreement.

Ben and Gordon talk about their current project. They realize that, although they have very different work styles, they share an enthusiasm for the project and a desire to see it done well.

What should you do next?

- ☐ Instruct Ben to pay more attention to detail in the future and Gordon to be more open to different ideas

**Not the best choice.** Although the solution to Ben and Gordon's conflict may well be to meet each other halfway in the manner described, it needs to come from them rather than being handed down.

- ☐ Re-emphasize the importance of team cohesion and co-operation to them, then call the meeting to a close

**Not the best choice.** Although Ben and Gordon have worked out their differences to some extent, they have not discussed how to bridge the gap between their different work styles.

- ☐ Ask Ben and Gordon to take turns proposing possible ways that they could work together more effectively

**Correct choice.** Now that Ben and Gordon have established the common goal of seeing the project succeed, they can begin to brainstorm solutions for meeting that goal.

Ben and Gordon settle on the idea that they need to make some compromises in their work styles to get along. Ben needs to learn to be more detail-oriented, and Gordon needs to be more receptive to Ben's creative ideas.

What should you do next?

- ☐ End the meeting with the understanding that they will report back next week to say how they're doing

**Not the best choice.** There's another important step to complete before ending the meeting: Ben and Gordon need specific actions to help them accomplish their goals of working together better. Otherwise, they will have nothing concrete to judge their progress by.

- ☐ Have Ben and Gordon explain their feelings to each other

**Not the best choice.** This should have occurred earlier in the meeting, and Ben and Gordon's feelings about the situation should be clear.

- ☐ Lay out a specific action plan for both Ben and Gordon to help them make this compromise work

**Correct choice.** Ben and Gordon have settled on a general idea of how to settle their dispute. However, they need a more specific plan of action to commit to. This will help keep them honest in their effort to work together better.

You help Ben and Gordon work out a list of behaviors they can follow to help their relationship as teammates improve. The list is specific enough to ensure that they'll know whether or not they are abiding by it.

What should you do next?

- ☐ Plan a meeting with Ben and Gordon next week to check their progress

**Correct choice.** A brief check-in meeting in the future will allow you to see how effective the plan has been at improving Ben and Gordon's work relationship.

- ☐ Congratulate the two of them and let the meeting end

**Not the best choice.** Though the meeting is almost over, you still need to plan to check in on Ben and Gordon's progress in the near future.

- ☐ Warn them that if the plan doesn't work out, you will have to assign them to new project groups

**Not the best choice.** Ben and Gordon have worked hard to arrive at a compromise and have a good plan for improving their work relationship. Giving them a warning now would be unhelpful and unnecessary.

## Coach employees to manage difficult interactions

To teach your direct reports to handle difficult interactions themselves, consider implementing these coaching strategies:

- Role-play conflict-resolution situations with one or more employees. Ask employees for their opinions about what went well, what didn't go well, and how they might handle the next practice scenario better.
- Establish goals for practicing and strengthening conflict-resolution skills.

For example, suggest that an employee identify a colleague with whom he or she has a fairly minor disagreement. The employee could practice conflict-management skills—such as framing the problem in terms of differences, expressing emotions instead of blaming, and so forth—with this "safe" person. He or she could then gradually practice with more difficult situations.

- Define ways to measure progress toward goals. For instance, will your direct report have achieved the goal if he or she conducts three conversations with a colleague that lead to improvements in the relationship?
- Provide needed resources, such as access to conflict-resolution courses or workshops. Suggest that the employee talk about conflict resolution with individuals whom you know to be particularly skilled.

While coaching, keep in mind that your employees will need time to fully grasp the art of managing difficult interactions. They'll also need frequent opportunities to hone their skills. Some individuals may not even initially be aware that they lack the ability to skillfully handle conflict. Others may know they need to strengthen these skills but don't know how to do so. Still others may understand the techniques behind managing difficult interactions but need to stop and think before applying them. All of these individuals could benefit from your guidance. With enough coaching, practice, and feedback, your direct reports should eventually be able to manage their own conflicts effectively.

Consider the difficult interactions currently cropping up among your employees. Which ones should you intervene in? Which ones should be resolved by the people involved? How might you coach your direct reports so that they learn how to manage difficult interactions themselves?

## Overview

This section provides interactive exercises so you can practice what you've learned. These exercises are self-checks only; your answers will not be used to evaluate your performance in the topic.

### Scenario

Assume the role of a manager in a fictional situation and explore different outcomes based on your choices (5-10 minutes).

### Check Your Knowledge

Assess your understanding of key points by completing a 10-question quiz (10 minutes).

## Scenario: Part 1

### Part 1

As manager of the Creative group, William works closely with his counterpart, Audrey, in Production. Once Creative finishes a design, such as a marketing piece, it is delivered to Production, which integrates the design with other elements, schedules reviews, and arranges for printing and electronic distribution.

William is responsible for seeing his projects through Production and depends on Audrey to line up resources in a busy department with many deliverables and tight deadlines. William realizes that his interactions with Audrey aren't always smooth—yet he needs her to move his projects along. Let's hear what each has to say.

**William:** I love working with different people, trying to get a feel for what they're after. Usually they don't know themselves. I operate on hunch and feel. Creating a design is an iterative game of discovery. Once we finally nail the solution, it's Production's turn. Now there, I have a problem. No matter what I do, Audrey puts me at the bottom of her list. She schedules my projects last, even when I give her plenty of notice. Audrey and I have never clicked.

**Audrey:** We turn creativity into reality. I like having a solid deliverable—something tangible—that you can make and hand over to someone. And I still have opportunities for heads-down, hands-on work. We're so under resourced that I have to. I don't know how we achieve what we do. It's

complicated—meshing our strengths, over a variety of projects, so that we don't waste time. Everybody wants everything yesterday. Especially William.

What might be preventing William from improving his interactions with Audrey?

- Thinking he needs to change Audrey, but can't

**Correct choice.**

Thinking he needs to change Audrey, but can't, is a likely barrier to a better relationship with Audrey. While William is probably correct that he can't change her, he's not correct in thinking that changing her is the only way to improve their relationship.

A common barrier to dealing with difficult interactions is assuming you can't improve things because you can't change the other person. To improve interactions, the goal is not to change the other person, but to *change how the two of you interact*. You make this happen by *changing your own behavior*. You need to acknowledge your role in the difficulty and do what you can to achieve the desired result.

- Fearing any conflict that might arise

**Not the best choice.**

A fear of conflict is not an obvious barrier in this situation. Nothing indicates that William fears conflict. In fact, he enjoys the challenge of interacting with others in situations where the outcome is not clear.

However, fear of conflict prevents many people from dealing with difficult interactions. If you fear conflict, acknowledge that while conflict isn't pleasant, it *is* part of life. Examine ways to become more comfortable with conflict. To motivate yourself, focus on the positive outcomes that could result from dealing with conflict.

- Deciding it's better to accept the status quo

**Not the best choice.**

Deciding the status quo is a better alternative is not an obvious barrier in this situation. William seems to recognize that there would be real benefits from improving his interactions with Audrey.

However, accepting the status quo allows many people to avoid dealing with difficult interactions. To decide whether to accept the status quo, evaluate whether the risks of a difficult interaction are worth the benefits of an improved situation. In some cases, the risks may not be worth it. But if the potential

benefits are there, consider taking the risks involved in improving the situation.

## Scenario: Part 2

### Part 2

Now look at a typical interaction between William and Audrey.

**William:** Audrey, did you get my e-mail about the Web site redesign project that's coming down the pike?

**Audrey:** Yes. Did you get my reply? About letting me know the specifics when you know more?

**William:** Well, I thought an upfront ballpark estimate might be helpful. Just to give you a heads up. You know, so I'm on your radar screen.

**Audrey:** Look, William, I appreciate your filling me in on the big picture. But ballpark estimates often wind up out in left field. They're not very reliable.

**William:** Well you know my ballparks, Audrey. They're home runs! Right on!

**Audrey:** Fine. I'll "pencil" you in.

**William:** Just want to make sure we can deliver ASAP and on time.

**Audrey:** William, my group always delivers on time.

What might be the cause of William's difficulties with Audrey?

- [Different perspectives](#)

#### Correct choice.

Differing perspectives could be at the root of this situation. William and Audrey *may* have different perspectives about how to schedule projects, though that's not entirely clear at this point. When you find someone else's behavior frustrating, make sure to speculate or inquire about the other's perspective. By acknowledging the person's point of view and appreciating his or her perception of a situation, you can move toward resolution.

- [Different motivations](#)

#### Not the best choice.

Different motivations do not appear to be at the root of this situation. In fact, William and Audrey both seem motivated by a common goal: to deliver a product on time.



However, in some situations, different motivations can cause difficult interactions. Discovering what motivates someone helps you to accommodate him or her, for mutual benefit. You can use what you know about the other person to anticipate how the two of you can best work together.

- [Different styles](#)

**Correct choice.**

Clearly, different styles are at the root of this situation. William and Audrey have very different ways of working and communicating. If he wants to take the initiative in improving their interactions, William needs to understand Audrey's style and adapt his work and communication style to accommodate it.

By identifying another person's work and communication style, you can focus on how to accommodate that person's preferences. Remember that the goal is not to change the other person, but to change the way you interact with that person. You may need to alter your own behavior to accommodate the other person's style.

## Scenario: Part 3

### Part 3

William can see that he and Audrey have very different styles. He suspects that they might have different perspectives as well. Now that William has thought about possible root causes for his difficult interactions with Audrey, he needs to select appropriate strategies to deal with the root causes.

What strategies might William use to improve his interactions with Audrey?

- [Talk about their motivations](#)

**Correct choice.**

Talking about motivations is a good way to begin building common ground and revealing shared interests. The fact that William and Audrey are both motivated by a common goal can help them establish areas of agreement and then move forward.

- [Explain to Audrey his approach to scheduling](#)

**Not the best choice.**

It would be better to *ask* Audrey about *her* approach to scheduling. By asking questions and inviting Audrey's perspective, William can discover whether they have different perspectives. If he uncovers any differences, he can then explain his own approach and acknowledge the differences. Both might then see how their different approaches may be contributing to the tension between them.

- Reassure Audrey that his ballpark estimates are historically "right on"

### Not the best choice.

William should accommodate Audrey's work style, not expect Audrey to adapt to his style. Audrey wants real numbers and dates before she starts scheduling her group's resources. She clearly does not want to waste her time creating a schedule that she feels is not yet firm.

## Scenario: Conclusion

### Conclusion

Let's see how William puts his strategies to work.

**William:** Audrey, I was thinking about our conversation. You know, we really want the same thing: to deliver great products on time.

**Audrey:** Can't argue with you there.

**William:** But we may have different ways of reaching the same goal. For example, how do you go about scheduling resources for a project?

**Audrey:** Well, I figure out the tasks and people involved, the time for each task, then start moving tasks and people around to make sure there is no down time. We can't afford that.

**William:** Sounds complex. When I schedule a project, I do "ballpark" it. I have a very good sense of the how long the project will take, but I leave leeway for tasks within that general framework.

**Audrey:** Really? That's different. My scheduling breaks down into predictable tasks. It's so interrelated that I don't want to schedule until I have a clear idea of what's real. Otherwise, it's a waste of time.

**William:** So when I say I'm "ballparking" a start date, you don't want to hear it. But if I could give you a solid start date, you'd schedule me in?

**Audrey:** Right. I don't want to begin to schedule until I have an actual start date.

**William:** I can do that. And I will.

To improve his interactions with Audrey, William needed to identify the causes of their difficult interactions, select strategies for addressing them, and put those strategies into action. By emphasizing common interests and probing for different perspectives, William was able to have a more productive conversation.

William's estimated, but reliable, "ballpark date"—restated as the actual "start date"—may be all that Audrey needs. Different styles can disguise the fact that both parties are talking about the same thing. Often, improving the way you interact with another person is surprisingly simple.

## Activity: Check Your Knowledge: Question 1

Difficult interactions may escalate to highly undesirable outcomes in the form of strained relationships, wasted time, and declining performance. Two of the three statements below are also true about difficult interactions. Which is the false statement?

- Many people feel reluctant to deal with difficult interactions.

**Not the best choice.**

This is actually a *true* statement: Many people do feel reluctant to deal with difficult interactions. The false statement is: "Over time, the majority of difficult interactions resolve themselves." In fact, time seldom resolves problems—people do.

- Not all difficult interactions are worth the time and energy required to manage them.

**Not the best choice.**

This is actually a *true* statement: Not all difficult interactions are worth the time and energy required to manage them. The false statement is: "Over time, the majority of difficult interactions resolve themselves." In fact, time seldom resolves problems—people do.

- Over time, the majority of difficult interactions resolve themselves.

**Correct choice.**

The majority of difficult interactions don't in fact resolve themselves. Time seldom resolves problems—people do.

## Check Your Knowledge: Question 2

Many managers avoid dealing with a difficult situation because they fear worsening the conflict. Which of the following strategies would you use to overcome fear of conflict?

- Acknowledge that conflict is part of life, and focus on the positive outcomes of addressing conflict.

**Correct choice.**

The first step in overcoming fear of conflict is to acknowledge that while conflict can feel uncomfortable, it is also a part of life. Focusing on the potential positive outcomes of addressing conflict—and identifying ways to become more comfortable facing conflict—can help you move past your fear.

- Acknowledge that you've played a role in the problem situation that has come up between you and the other person.

**Not the best choice.**

This is not a strategy for overcoming fear of conflict. It's a strategy for removing another barrier to managing difficult interactions: the belief that such situations are others' fault. To overcome fear of conflict, acknowledge that conflict is part of life, and focus on the potential positive outcomes of addressing conflict.

- Identify actions you can take to begin improving the tough situation in question.

**Not the best choice.**

This is not a strategy for overcoming fear of conflict. It's a strategy for removing another barrier to managing difficult interactions: the belief that such situations are others' fault. To overcome fear of conflict, acknowledge that conflict is a part of life, and focus on the potential positive outcomes of addressing conflict.

## Check Your Knowledge: Question 3

What is the primary cause behind most difficult interactions in the workplace?

- One person's malicious intent toward another

**Not the best choice.**

Most difficult interactions don't stem from malicious intent, but from differences between people. These differences can take the form of conflicting interests, motivations, perceptions, work and communication styles, and life experiences or cultural background.

- An individual's poor character or incompetence

**Not the best choice.**

Most difficult interactions don't stem from character flaws or incompetence, but from differences between people. These differences can take the form of conflicting interests, motivations, perceptions, work and communication styles, and life experiences or cultural background.

- Differences between people

**Correct choice.**

Most difficult interactions in the workplace stem from differences between people—in interests, motivations, perceptions, work and communication styles, and life experiences or cultural background.

## Check Your Knowledge: Question 4

Some difficult interactions arise because the people involved take different positions on an issue or have different interests regarding that issue. What are "interests"?

- A person's stance on a particular issue

**Not the best choice.**

A stance on a particular issue is a position, not an interest. Interests are the desires a person feels regarding an issue. For example, a new team member who wants to receive as much vacation time as other team members (his *position* on the *issue* of vacation time) may have an *interest* in being treated fairly—that is, a desire. Often, identifying differing interests can help the people involved to design creative solutions that satisfy both parties' interests.

- A person's desires regarding a particular issue

**Correct choice.**

Interests are a person's desires regarding a particular issue. For example, a new team member who wants to receive as much vacation time as other team members receive (his *position* on the *issue* of vacation time) may have an *interest* in being treated fairly—that is, a desire. Often, identifying differing interests can help the people involved to design creative solutions that satisfy both their interests.

- A person's plan for resolving a particular issue

**Not the best choice.**

A plan for resolving a particular issue is more of an intent, not an interest. Interests are the desires a person feels regarding an issue. For example, a new team member who wants to receive as much vacation time as other team members (his *position* on the *issue* of vacation time) may have an *interest* in being treated fairly—that is, a desire. Often, identifying differing interests can help the people involved to design creative solutions that satisfy both parties' interests.

## Check Your Knowledge: Question 5

Your time and energy are limited, so you need to carefully evaluate which difficult interactions merit your attention and which should be let go. In which situation might you decide to try to resolve a particular series of difficult interactions with someone at work?

- You've noticed that the other person has a long history of troubled relationships with many people across a wide range of situations.

**Not the best choice.**

When another person has a long history of troubled relationships across many situations and with many different people, it would *not* be wise to invest time and energy in trying to improve your relationship with the person. Such a situation has little potential for improvement. Instead, you would want to invest time in managing relationships that are important and long term, and that have high stakes.

- You've learned that the other person is profoundly troubled emotionally.

**Not the best choice.**

When another person is profoundly troubled emotionally, it would *not* be wise to invest time and energy in trying to improve your relationship with him or her. Such a situation has little potential for improvement. Instead, you would want to invest time in managing relationships that are important and long term, and that have high stakes.

- Your relationship with that person is long term and the stakes are high.

**Correct choice.**

When a particular workplace relationship is crucial and you need to collaborate with that person for a long time under high-stakes conditions, you'll want to find ways to manage difficult interactions with that person. By contrast, if you had a troubled interaction with a colleague on a short-term, minor, and one-time project, you probably wouldn't want to invest the time and energy in trying to improve the relationship.

## Check Your Knowledge: Question 6

While discussing difficult interactions with the other person involved, you need to uncover the facts of the situation—or what's really going on. Which of the following statements is true about this process?

- Each person's experiences, assumptions about what's important, and intentions will influence his or her perception of the facts.

**Correct choice.**

There are two sides to every story, and each person views a difficult interaction based on a set of facts that he or she perceives. Both people in a conflict might be using a different set of facts to form an impression of what's going on. For example, if Harry experienced problems on an earlier project because of late updates, he might argue, "Mary is jeopardizing our project by not submitting updates on time." Harry believes that not following through on paperwork results in failure. Mary, meanwhile, saw an earlier project fall apart because people spent too much time on paperwork. Both people's experiences are true for them—and influence their view of the facts.

- Each person in the conflict will have similar perceptions about what's going on that has led to the difficult situation.

**Not the best choice.**

Each person in a conflict *won't* likely have similar perceptions about what has led to the difficult situation. That's because people's perceptions stem from the facts they perceive. The true

statement is "Each person's experiences, assumptions about what's important, and intentions will influence his or her perception of the facts."

There are two sides to every story, and each person views a difficult interaction based on a set of facts that he or she perceives. Both people in a conflict might be using a different set of facts to form an impression of what's going on. For example, if Harry experienced problems on an earlier project because of late updates, he might argue, "Mary is jeopardizing our project by not submitting updates on time." Harry believes that not following through on paperwork results in failure. Mary, meanwhile, saw an earlier project fall apart because people spent too much time on paperwork. Both people's experiences are true for them—and influence their view of the facts.

- One person will likely have made a significantly larger contribution to the problem than the other person has made.

**Not the best choice.**

In any conflict, one person doesn't necessarily make a significantly larger contribution to the problem than the other person has made. Both people actually contribute to the problem because they each view the facts differently. The true statement is "Each person's experiences, assumptions about what's important, and intentions will influence his or her perception of the facts."

There are two sides to every story, and each person views a difficult interaction based on a set of facts that he or she perceives. Both people in a conflict might be using a different set of facts to form an impression of what's going on. For example, if Harry experienced problems on an earlier project because of late updates, he might argue, "Mary is jeopardizing our project by not submitting updates on time." Harry believes that not following through on paperwork results in failure. Mary, meanwhile, saw an earlier project fall apart because people spent too much time on paperwork. Both people's experiences are true for them—and influence their view of the facts.

## Check Your Knowledge: Question 7

In addition to understanding each person's perceptions about what's going on in a difficult interaction, it's important to identify the emotions involved. Which of the following statements is true about the process of identifying emotions?

- Some managers have trouble putting labels on their emotions and need to develop their "feelings vocabulary."

**Correct choice.**

By developing a "feelings vocabulary," a manager can more accurately describe the emotions that he or she is experiencing during a difficult interaction. The manager can also better understand the other person's descriptions of emotions.

- When a person experiences an emotion during a difficult interaction, he or she cannot change that emotion.

**Not the best choice.**

People can in fact ease intense emotions they are experiencing. The true statement about identifying emotions is "Some managers have trouble putting labels on their emotions and need to develop their 'feelings vocabulary.'" By developing that vocabulary, a manager can more accurately describe the feelings that he or she is experiencing during a difficult interaction—as well as better understand the other person's descriptions of feelings.

- In describing your emotions during a difficult interaction, you should focus on the most intense feeling only.

**Not the best choice.**

You should describe your complete range of emotions, not just the most intense feelings, while discussing difficult interactions. The true statement about identifying emotions is "Some managers have trouble putting labels on their emotions and need to develop their 'feelings vocabulary.'" By developing that vocabulary, a manager can more accurately describe the feelings that he or she is experiencing during a difficult interaction—as well as better understand the other person's descriptions of feelings.

## Check Your Knowledge: Question 8

In addition to understanding each person's perceptions of what's going on and identifying the emotions raised by a difficult interaction, the individuals involved in a difficult interaction must address concerns about self-image. Which of the following statements most strongly suggests that the speaker has self-image concerns?

- "I really made a serious mistake that day, when I forgot to tell him how important that meeting was."

**Not the best choice.**

This statement actually indicates a healthy self-image. People with a healthy self-image know that everyone makes mistakes at times. By contrast, the statement "I've failed to communicate my expectations clearly enough to her. I'm not a good manager" suggests that the speaker has self-image concerns. Such concerns can crop up during a difficult interaction if the person has an either/or mindset: "I'm either loyal or disloyal," "I'm either competent or incompetent," and so forth. This mindset makes it impossible to tolerate criticism from others or to acknowledge that one has contributed to a problem—two abilities that are essential to managing difficult interactions. Thus it's vital to acknowledge and address self-image concerns while discussing difficult interactions.

- "I've failed to communicate my expectations clearly enough to her. I'm not a good manager."

**Correct choice.**

Concerns about self-image can crop up during a difficult interaction if a person has an either/or mindset: "I'm either loyal or disloyal," "I'm either competent or incompetent," and so forth. This mindset makes it impossible to tolerate criticism from others or to acknowledge that one has contributed to a problem—two abilities that are essential to managing difficult interactions. Thus it's vital to acknowledge and address self-image concerns while discussing difficult interactions.



- "I've got to be more open to negative feedback about my performance in this new role."

**Not the best choice.**

This statement actually indicates a healthy self-image. People with a healthy self-image are open to negative feedback about themselves. By contrast, the statement "I've failed to communicate my expectations clearly enough to her. I'm not a good manager" suggests that the speaker has self-image concerns. Such concerns can crop up during a difficult interaction if the person has an either/or mindset: "I'm either loyal or disloyal," "I'm either competent or incompetent," and so forth. This mindset makes it impossible to tolerate criticism from others or to acknowledge that one has contributed to a problem—two abilities that are essential to managing difficult interactions. Thus it's vital to acknowledge and address self-image concerns while discussing difficult interactions.

## Check Your Knowledge: Question 9

During a recent conversation, James and Carla—a manager and employee on a prototype-development team—realized they had conflicting perceptions about what's critical. The two worked out a solution to their conflict that entails changing the number of prototype iterations conducted. After implementing their plan, James and Carla will compare the number of iterations conducted for the current set of prototypes to the number they agreed to in their plan. But they've left out a step that's crucial for successful implementation of their plan. What is it?

- [Piecing together a picture of how they got into their difficult situation](#)

**Not the best choice.**

James and Carla actually *have* used conversation to clarify the differences that caused their difficulty. The step they've left out is deciding how they'll communicate going forward—including how they'll discuss progress on their plan, handle tensions that arise during these discussions, and make necessary changes to their plan. This step is essential for ensuring successful implementation of any solution to a difficult interaction.

- [Selecting metrics to assess how well they've carried out their solution](#)

**Not the best choice.**

James and Carla actually *have* selected metrics for assessing the success of their solution plan. The step they've left out is deciding how they'll communicate going forward—including how they'll discuss progress on their plan, handle tensions that arise during these discussions, and make necessary changes to their plan. This step is essential for ensuring successful implementation of any solution to a difficult interaction.

- [Deciding how they'll communicate going forward](#)

**Correct choice.**

James and Carla don't seem to have determined how they'll communicate going forward—including how they'll discuss progress on their plan, handle tensions that arise during these discussions, and make necessary changes to their plan. Like the other steps they've taken (clarifying the differences behind their difficulty and selecting metrics for assessing the success

of their plan), this step is essential for ensuring successful implementation of any solution to a difficult interaction.

## Check Your Knowledge: Question 10

When two of your employees get embroiled in a conflict, you have to determine whether to intervene. Which of the following conditions would warrant intervention?

- The disagreement has erupted between two direct reports who have equal standing and rank in your department or team.

**Not the best choice.**

When a disagreement erupts between employees of equal standing and rank, it's best to let them resolve their conflict themselves. The condition that *would* cause you to intervene is "You've determined that the conflict has begun encompassing additional staff members beyond the original disputants."

You can facilitate resolution of such a conflict by helping the disputants define the problem in specific terms, listen to one another, identify areas of agreement, and implement solutions. You can also use coaching to teach employees to manage conflicts on their own instead of pulling other people into their disputes.

- You've determined that the conflict has begun encompassing additional staff members beyond the original disputants.

**Correct choice.**

When a conflict starts encompassing additional staff members beyond the original disputants, it's best to intervene. You can facilitate resolution of a conflict by helping the disputants define the problem in specific terms, listen to one another, identify areas of agreement, and implement solutions that satisfy the disputants' differing concerns and issues. You can also use coaching to teach employees to manage conflicts on their own rather than pulling other people into their disputes.

- You've determined that the conflict doesn't involve possible civil rights violations or other potentially illegal conduct.

**Not the best choice.**

When a conflict doesn't involve civil rights violations or other potential illegal conduct, you don't need to intervene. The condition that *would* cause you to intervene is "You've determined that the conflict has begun encompassing additional staff members beyond the original disputants."

You can facilitate resolution of such a conflict by helping the disputants define the problem in specific terms, listen to one another, identify areas of agreement, and implement solutions. You can also use coaching to teach employees to manage conflicts on their own rather than pulling other people into their disputes.

## Activity: Check Your Knowledge: Results

# Your score:

## Steps for managing a difficult interaction

### 1. Identify the cause.

Ask whether you and the other person have differing:

- Interests on an issue
- Perceptions about what's critical
- Motivations
- Work styles
- Communication styles
- Life experiences and cultural backgrounds

Differing interests can be addressed by creative solutions that at least partially satisfy both individuals' interests. Other differences, when discussed constructively, can lead to new understanding of one another's perspectives.

### 2. Decide whether to deal with the situation.

You should attempt to improve matters with the other person when:

- You've dealt with your own contributions to the problem but the difficulty persists
- You want to do what's best for the long run, not simply vent your feelings to achieve short-term emotional relief
- Your working relationship with the other person is important and long term, and the stakes are high
- There's hope of improving the situation because neither you nor the other person is profoundly troubled emotionally or has a long history of destructive relationships with many people across a wide range of situations

### 3. Assess the facts.

With the other person, share perceptions of what's going on and explain where those perceptions are coming from. Cite information you're using, experiences you've had, and assumptions about what's critical.

Also compare your intentions—you may discover that you have similar aims and priorities but are dealing with them differently.

Finally, acknowledge your contributions to the problem, and encourage the other person to do the same.

### 4. Identify the emotions.

During these early conversations, also describe the emotions you experience as a result of the difficult interactions with the other person. Be sure to describe feelings as *your* feelings, rather than make character judgments or accusations about the other person. Invite the other person to do the same.

Also consider defusing intense negative emotions you're experiencing—for example, by reminding yourself that the other person has good intentions.

### 5. Deal with concerns about self-image.

While clarifying the facts and emotions involved in a series of difficult interactions, also address concerns about self-image. Rather than assuming that you're either competent or incompetent, a good person or a bad person, and so forth, accept that everyone is a mix of strengths and weaknesses and that each person makes mistakes. Probe for any concerns about self-image in the other person as well.

### 6. Create a plan for change.

Together with the other person, craft a plan for change based on your new understanding about interests, motivations, and differences. Once you've decided on a plan that satisfies each side's differing concerns and interests, determine how you'll measure success and how you'll communicate going forward.

## Steps for improving your conflict-management style

### 1. Document your difficult interactions.

Over a few weeks, keep track of difficult interactions you experience in the workplace. Record your observations in a notebook, indicating what caused each conflict, what happened during each situation, and what the outcome was.

### 2. Identify patterns and explore your attitudes.

Analyze your observations to determine if they form a pattern.

For example, do you tend to:

- Avoid conflict as much as possible?
- Let the other person have his or her way all the time?
- Promote win/lose situations rather than win/win?

Also think about your attitudes about difficult interactions.

For instance, do you tend to:

- Assume that difficult situations are others' fault?
- Believe that you have no hope of improving a difficult situation?
- Believe that problems will resolve themselves?
- Fear interpersonal conflict?

### 3. Prepare an improvement plan.

Identify ways to change unproductive attitudes toward difficult interactions.

For example, remind yourself that most problems don't resolve themselves, and that you're not trying to change another person; you're attempting to alter the way the two of you interact. To generate ideas for improving your ability to manage difficult

interactions, talk with colleagues who are skilled at handling conflict and read books on the subject. Consider getting coaching in conflict management.

Based on what you've learned, define actions you'll take to strengthen your skills.

For example, will you ask a colleague to help you role-play a conversation about a particular conflict with an employee? Take a course on conflict management? Try dealing with a relatively minor difficulty and then move on to more challenging situations?

#### **4. Implement your plan.**

Carry out your plan, checking your progress at least once a week to ensure that you stay on track. Consider asking a trusted colleague to check in with you, to help ensure that you remain accountable for carrying out your plan.

#### **5. Assess your results.**

Once you've carried out your plan, document another few weeks' worth of difficult interactions. Compare the results of your new style with those of your old style. Are you reaching more satisfactory agreements with fewer negative repercussions? Do you have more productive and realistic attitudes about difficult interactions? If not, move on to Step 6.

#### **6. Make any necessary changes to your plan.**

Determine why you did not get good results from your previous plan.

For instance, did you practice new conflict-management skills with overly challenging situations first, instead of starting with more manageable difficulties?

Based on your insights, develop a revised plan for improving the way in which you manage difficult interactions. Carry out the plan and again assess your results, continuing to fine-tune your plan until you see positive results from your conflict-management style.

## **Steps for using active listening**

### **1. Listen to the other person.**

Give the other person your full attention—resisting any urge to interrupt, plan your next comment, or judge the other person. Use nonverbal behavior—such as leaning forward, nodding, and so forth—to demonstrate that you're really listening.

### **2. Get the other person to clarify his or her position.**

Ask open-ended questions to encourage the other person to clarify his or her position and interests regarding the issue that is at the heart of your conflict. Start your questions with phrases such as:

- "Tell me about . . ."
- "Explain . . ."
- "How do you feel about . . ."
- "Describe . . ."
- "What happened when . . ."

### **3. Paraphrase to show your understanding.**

Periodically paraphrase what you're hearing, being sure to reflect the emotions as well as the content of the message. For example:

- "As I understand it, your position is . . ."
- "You seem to be concerned about . . ."

If the other person disagrees with your paraphrasing, ask him or her to clarify the point. Then paraphrase again to see if you understand the message.

#### **4. Determine whether your interpretations are becoming more accurate.**

As the discussion progresses, listen for signals that your interpretations of what you're hearing are becoming more accurate. Comments from the other person such as "That's exactly what I meant" and "That's right! I think you understand my problem" indicate that you've practiced good active listening. Body language such as smiling, nodding, and sighs of relief also suggest that you're on the right track.

## **Steps for resolving conflicts between employees**

### **1. Decide whether to intervene.**

You should intervene in a difficult interaction between two employees when:

- The problem involves an assertive person and a timid person, or two people of unequal rank.
- The problem has begun involving additional staff members.
- The problem involves illegal conduct.

### **2. Help the employees define the problem.**

Encourage them to describe their perceptions of what's going on, the emotions involved, and their differences in terms of motivations, interests, and priorities.

### **3. Model active listening.**

Use paraphrasing and other active-listening techniques to model effective communication for the two disputants.

### **4. Help the individuals identify areas of agreement.**

The two employees may have a project's best interest at heart, but may have different opinions about how best to approach the project. Identifying areas of agreement helps people see that they have similar priorities—which can in turn defuse intense negative emotions and lead to creative ideas for improving the working relationship.

### **5. Encourage them to brainstorm alternative solutions.**

Ask how well the proposed ideas satisfy the disputants' concerns and issues.

### **6. Help them create a plan for change.**

The more involved the two disputants are in crafting the plan, the more committed to it they will feel.

### **7. Schedule follow-up meetings.**

Set up a series of meetings to discuss progress on the plan and make any needed adjustments to keep the working relationship moving in a more productive direction.

## Tips for letting go of a difficult interaction

Some difficult interactions can't be managed—because one or more of the individuals involved are profoundly disturbed emotionally or behave in destructive ways over too wide a range of situations. In such cases, you need to let go of the situation and accept that the relationship can't be improved. These guidelines can help:

- Accept that letting go takes time. You need to release the intense emotions associated with the problem situation and relinquish the notion that you're a victim and the other person is a villain.
- Remind yourself that it's not solely up to you to make things better. Your responsibility is to do your best.
- Give up any fantasies in which the working relationship with the other person has become perfect.
- Accept that both you and the other person aren't perfect.
- Remind yourself that the conflict is not the sole definition of who you are. Don't tie your identity to the difficult situation.
- Know that letting go of a difficult situation doesn't mean that you're an uncaring person.

## Tips for effective listening

- Conduct the conversation in a place where there will be minimum outside noises and distractions.
- Ensure that you're well rested and mentally prepared to pay attention.
- Ask the other person to clarify any language or technical terms that you don't understand.
- Focus on what you're hearing, rather than formulating your next comment, becoming preoccupied with how strongly you disagree, or judging the other person.
- Resist any urge to interrupt or to protest what you're hearing.
- Accept what the speaker is actually saying to you, rather than hearing only what you want to hear.
- Avoid getting sidetracked from the real topic by something tangential the speaker says.
- Avoid assuming that you know what the speaker's conclusions are going to be before he or she states them.
- Use paraphrasing and feedback to indicate your understanding of the message.
- Be mindful of your own biases and prejudices, so they don't unduly influence your listening.
- Be aware of words that might trigger an overly emotional reaction in you because they evoke an issue that you have strong feelings about.
- If you're having trouble discerning the speaker's point, ask, "What are the reasons you're telling me this?"
- Maintain eye contact and use other body language (such as leaning forward and nodding) to show that you're listening.

## Tips for managing anger

- Recognize that you have a right to feel anger and to express it—constructively.
- Resist any urge to rationalize a reluctance to express anger—for example, "I don't want to hurt the other person's feelings."

- Commit to learning how to express anger constructively. Consider reading books about the subject or finding a coach who can help you.
- Watch for signs that you're stuffing down angry feelings—such as use of sarcasm, sniping, gossiping, or conspiring behind the other person's back.
- Practicing envisioning the cause of your anger as a behavior or situation—not another person.
- Dispel intense anger through harmless physical activity—such as hitting a cushion for several minutes. Or channel it into productive routine activities, such as cleaning up your office. Or work through it with a trusted friend who can help you identify the causes of your anger rather than stir it up further.
- Express anger constructively by describing your emotion to the person whose behaviors upset you, rather than making threats or accusations.

For example, "When you missed two meetings in a row, I felt angry because I thought the other team members wouldn't get the information they needed to carry out their part of the project."

- Don't just describe your anger and then let the problem situation drop. Follow through by developing a solution to the situation.
- If you have trouble describing your anger to someone you work with, write down all the behaviors or situations that make you furious. Ask him or her to do the same. Get together to discuss the important items on your respective lists—taking turns and listening without interrupting.
- Help the other person manage the physical manifestations of his or her anger.

For example, if the person is pacing, invite him or her to sit down, and offer a glass of water. Hear the person out, taking a deep breath if you're tempted to interrupt.

## Tips for dealing with extra-frustrating behaviors

If the other person . . .	Try . . .
Is aggressive and disrespectful	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Commanding respect by remaining calm.</li> <li>• Interrupting verbal attacks by repeating the person's name until he or she stops attacking.</li> <li>• Communicating your bottom line: "When you're ready to speak to me with respect, I will take all the time you want to discuss this."</li> </ul>
Is a "know-it-all" and doesn't	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Going into the conversation thoroughly prepared to</li> </ul>



listen to your side	<p>support your perceptions and ideas.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Redirecting the person to your idea or information with phrases such as "I was just wondering," "Bear with me a minute," or "What do you suppose?"</li> <li>• Acknowledging that the person does possess valuable knowledge.</li> </ul>
Throws a temper tantrum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taking a ten-minute (or longer) break and then continuing the conversation.</li> <li>• Getting the person's attention by waving your arms and calling his or her name loudly enough to be heard.</li> <li>• Expressing genuine concern for the person: "Joe, Joe, nobody should have to feel this way! I want to help."</li> </ul>
Is uncommunicative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scheduling plenty of time for the person to respond to your ideas and questions.</li> <li>• Asking open-ended questions: "What are you thinking?" "How do you want to proceed?" "Where should we go from here?"</li> <li>• Gazing expectantly at the person for a longer-than-usual period of time after making a comment or asking a question.</li> </ul>
Assumes that the situation can't get better	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Giving him or her time to consider your action plan for change and get back to you.</li> <li>• Bringing up and addressing the negative aspects of an</li> </ul>

idea before the other person does.

- Engaging the person through use of "reverse psychology": "You're right: This *is* hopeless. Even you couldn't solve our problem."

## Tips for dissipating tension during a difficult conversation

- Do more listening than talking. When people feel that you've taken the time to listen and understand their concerns, tensions dissipate.
- Play up similarities (in interests, background, and so forth) and match the other person's gestures, body posture, and speaking style. Feelings of similarity lead to higher comfort levels and rapport.
- Use appropriate humor—you'll dispel negative feelings and boost your chances that the other person will like you, which in turn promotes relaxation and openness to new ideas. But don't use inside jokes, cultural allusions, or jokes that make light of the other person's issues or concerns.
- Acknowledge your own contributions to the problem. Often, that encourages the other person to reciprocate. And reciprocity creates feelings of connection and mutual obligation to be helpful.

## Tips for maintaining effective work relationships

- Emphasize a mutual problem-solving approach
- Be approachable
- Accept people as they are
- Keep relationship issues separate from process issues
- Be open-minded
- Balance reason with emotions
- Use active listening to inquire, listen, and understand the other person
- Consult with others before deciding on an action
- Rely on persuasion to get to agreements

## Worksheet for finding the source of the difficulty

<i>Worksheet for Finding the Source of the Difficulty</i>
<i>Use this worksheet to help you isolate the sources of the difficult interactions you're experiencing with someone at work.</i>
How does your perception of the situation differ from the other person's? asdasd asdasd asdasdasd
How might the other person's motivations differ from yours?
What do you find difficult about the other person's work style?
What do you find difficult about the other person's communication style?
Describe the issue at hand. What are your and the other person's positions and interests regarding this issue?
What experiential, cultural, or other differences may be contributing to the problem?
Bottom line—what conclusions can you draw about the source of the difficulty?

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## Worksheet for deciding whether to deal with a difficult interaction

<i>Worksheet for Deciding Whether to Deal with a Difficult Interaction</i>	
<i>Use this worksheet to determine whether you should manage a difficult interaction or let it go.</i>	
How would you characterize the importance of your relationship with this person?	
How will the difficult situation affect your ability to work with this person in the future? (Use a scale of 1–5, with 5 being the greatest impact)	
NOT AT ALL ----- TREMENDOUSLY	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5
If the two of you could successfully address the difficult behavior, how much would it benefit your working relationship? (Use a scale of 1–5, with 5 being the greatest potential)	
NO BENEFIT ----- ENORMOUS BENEFIT	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5
How high are the stakes in your relationship with this person?	
<input type="checkbox"/> High	<input type="checkbox"/> Medium <input type="checkbox"/> Low
Is your relationship with this person short term or long term?	
<input type="checkbox"/> Short	<input type="checkbox"/> Long
How likely is it that the relationship could be improved? <i>(If one or both parties has deep emotional problems or a history of destructive behaviors with a wide range of people in many different situations, the relationship probably can't be improved.)</i> (Use a scale of 1–5, with 5 being most likely)	
NOT LIKELY AT ALL ----- VERY LIKELY	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5
What are the potential costs of addressing this difficult situation?	
What are the potential benefits of addressing the situation?	
Is the payoff worth the time commitment?	
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No

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## Perceptions and behavior assessment

<i>Perceptions and Behavior Assessment</i>	
<i>Use this assessment to define a difficult situation from your perspective as well as from the other person's perspective.</i>	
What is the situation?	
What is your perception of the situation?	
What experiences, information, motivations, interests, and assumptions are causing you to see the situation that way?	
How does the other person see the situation?	
What experiences, information, motivations, interests, and assumptions are causing the other person to see the situation that way?	
Summarize the major differences between the two sides' views of the difficult situation. For each difference, list possible resolutions or areas of common ground.	
Difference	Resolution/Common Ground

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## Discussing difficult interactions assessment

<i>Discussing Difficult Interactions Assessment</i>		
Use this tool to assess how effectively you've discussed a difficult interaction with the other person involved. For each statement, indicate "Yes" or "No."		
During one or more conversations, the other person and I have...	Yes	No
1. Discussed our differing interests in the issue at hand.		
2. Acknowledged other differences, such as work or communication styles, motivations, perceptions about what's critical, and experiential and cultural backgrounds.		
3. Agreed that we want to improve matters between us.		
4. Shared our impressions of what's going on and the reasons behind our impressions.		
5. Described the emotions we're experiencing as a result of our difficulties.		
6. Acknowledged concerns about self-image that have cropped up because of the difficulty.		
7. Acknowledged that no one is perfect and that everyone makes mistakes.		
8. Demonstrated active listening with one another; for instance, by asking questions, paraphrasing, and not interrupting.		
9. Resisted the urge to blame, accuse, or judge one another.		
10. Stated our individual contributions to the problem.		
11. Found ways to defuse intense emotions; for example, by taking breaks and then returning to the discussion.		
12. Framed the discussion in terms of differences, not character flaws.		
13. Focused on differing perceptions, not presumed truths.		
14. Worked to identify emotions hidden behind any accusations or judgments.		
15. Worked to remove barriers to our ability to deal with the difficulty—such as fear of conflict or the belief that the problem will resolve itself.		
Based on your responses, how effective would you say your conversations about the difficulty with the other person have been?		
Consider the statements to which you responded "No." What actions might you take in a subsequent conversation with this person to improve your skills at managing the difficulty?		

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## Worksheet for creating a plan for change

<i>Worksheet for Creating a Plan for Change</i>	
<i>Use this worksheet to create a plan for addressing a series of difficult interactions with a particular person at work.</i>	
1. Describe the difficult situation.	
2. List the differences (in motivations, interests, work styles, and so forth) that have led to the difficulty.	
3. List the potential solutions to the problem that you and the other person have discussed. Ask how well each proposed solution would satisfy both parties' concerns and interests, even if partially.	
4. Select the one best solution.	
5. Clarify how you'll implement the selected solution.	
6. Explain how you'll measure success. (How will you and the other person know that the difficulty between you has been resolved?)	
7. Define ground rules for implementing the plan; for example, "Notify the other person several days ahead of time if we can't make a scheduled meeting or discussion."	
8. Clarify how you'll communicate going forward. (Will you and the other person meet weekly to discuss progress on the plan? Will you check in with each other by e-mail periodically?)	
9. Describe how you'll handle tensions or backsliding while implementing the plan, and how you'll go about making needed revisions to the plan.	

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## Worksheet for resolving a conflict between employees

<i>Worksheet for Resolving a Conflict Between Employees</i>		
<i>Use this worksheet to identify inter-employee conflicts that merit intervention, to facilitate productive conversations between the individuals involved, and to identify strategies for coaching employees on better managing difficult interactions.</i>		
<b>Part I. Deciding Whether to Intervene</b>		
<b>Statement</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
1. The conflict is between an assertive employee and a timid person.		
2. The conflict is between two people of different rank.		
3. The conflict has broadened beyond the two people to encompass additional staff members.		

4. The conflict involves illegal conduct, such as sexual harassment or civil rights violations.		
5. The individuals involved aren't aware that their difficulties are causing problems with productivity.		
6. The individuals involved are aware that their difficulties are causing problems, but they lack the ability to manage the difficulty themselves.		

If you answered "Yes" to any of the above statements, you'll need to intervene in the problem. Proceed to Part 2.

### Part II. Identifying People with Required Skills

Date of conversation:

Participants:

Participant 1's view of the problem (include emotions, motivations, and interests):

Participant 2's view of the problem (include emotions, motivations, and interests):

Areas of agreement:

Potential solutions (list how each alternative satisfies the disputants' concerns and issues):

Problem-resolution plan:

Future meetings to check progress:

### Part III. Coaching Employees in Conflict Resolution

Helping your employees to resolve a conflict is useful, but teaching them to manage difficult interactions themselves is even more useful. Below, identify how you will coach your direct reports to better handle difficult interactions themselves.

Employee	Coaching Strategy

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## Why Develop Others?



“At the end of the day, you bet on people, not strategies.”

Larry Bossidy  
Former CEO, AlliedSignal

In today’s global business environment, markets and regulations change quickly. Competitors constantly innovate. Technological changes are the norm.

In order to outmaneuver the competition and meet the demands of the moment, organizations must be agile. They must execute flawlessly. And they must transform themselves continuously.

Are your leaders ready?

Dr. Noel M. Tichy  
Professor  
University of Michigan Ross School of Business

We have now entered an era where I don’t care what industry you’re in, you need leaders who can make decisions, make judgment calls at every single level. All the way down to the interface with the customer.

If you go to a company like Google or any of the high tech companies, a lot of the innovation that Amazon does is happening right at the front line. Go ahead, try it, put it out there, we'll learn from it. That cannot happen if the senior leadership doesn't have a commitment to both develop the leadership capability, but develop the business through engaging people at all levels of the organization.

Becoming a teaching organization

I like to tell parents that they cannot delegate their responsibility to develop their children. And I think it is the same in an organization. Day in and day out the person that has the biggest impact on people in the organization is the next level above and the associates around and below. And so to build a learning organization I say is not enough. Learning could be, you know we are learning cooking, we are learning this or that, but teaching organizations, when I learned something, I have a responsibility to teach my colleagues.

So everybody takes responsibility for generating new knowledge and it is not enough to be a learner, you then have to translate it into teaching.

The Virtuous Teaching Cycle

The role of a leader is to ensure that the people who work for them and around them are better every day. There's only one way to make people better. It's to teach them, learn from them, create what I call "virtuous teaching cycles", not command and control.

A virtuous teaching cycle is teach learn, teach learn. And the leader has a responsibility for reducing the hierarchy, for having a point of view to start the discussion, but then to be responsible to hear everyone's voice, get everyone involved in a disciplined way. It is not a free for all. But it is the leader's responsibility to create that virtuous teaching cycle.

A wonderful example of virtuous teaching cycle is the program that Roger Enrico ran at Pepsi, where every one of the 10 vice presidents comes with a business project.

Roger Enrico gets smarter as result of five days with 10 vice presidents, because he's learning from them. He needs to lower the hierarchy. He needs to be open to learning. And in turn, the people participating need to be energized and empowered to come up and engage in problem solving.

Another example is at Best Buy, where every morning in the stores you would bring 20 associates or so together and they would review the profit and loss statement from the day before, what we learned from the different customer segments in our stores, what we can do to improve our performance this day. And they do that every single day. The store manager was learning mostly from the associates on the floor.

That was a virtuous teaching cycle where everybody is teaching everybody, everybody is learning and the result has been an incredible result at Best Buy.

“The growth and development of people is the highest calling of leadership.”

- Harvey S. Firestone

Founder, Firestone Tire and Rubber Co

There are clear advantages to leader-led development.

But for many leaders, taking on teaching, coaching, and other development responsibilities can seem daunting. You might avoid taking on these roles due to lack of time, resources, or your own lack of comfort with this role.

The following tips and resources can help you impart valuable learning to your team every day.

To develop others...

- Start with a Teachable Point of View

The first requirement of being able to develop other leaders is to have what I call a teachable point of view. I often give the example of, if I ran a tennis camp and you just came to day one of the tennis camp, I better have a teachable point of view on how I teach tennis. So you are standing there looking at me and it has got four elements. One, the ideas, well how do I teach the backhand, the forehand, the serve, rules of tennis. Then if I am a good tennis coach, I have a set of values. What are the right behaviors I want, how do I want you to dress, how do I want you to behave on the tennis court.

But if that's all I have, what do I do? Show you a power point presentation and then expect you to hit 500 backhands, 500 serves, run around for eight hours. I have to have a teachable point of view on emotional energy. How do I motivate you to buy in to the ideas and values?

On one end of the spectrum it could be I threaten you with corporal punishment, the other I can give you stock options, I can make you feel good about yourself, I can help you develop as a human being, what motivates you.

And then finally, how do I make the tough judgment calls, the yes/no, decisions as the tennis coach, the ball is in, the ball is out. I don't hire consultants and set up a committee, it is yes/no. And the same with running a business, what are the products, services, distribution channels, customer segments that are going to grow top line growth and profitability of the organization.

What are the values that I want everyone in the organization to have, how do I emotionally energize thousands of people, and then how do I make the yes/no, judgments on people and on business issues. So the fundamental building block of being able to develop other leaders is to have that teachable point of view just like the tennis coach.

To develop others...

- Lead with questions

Questions are hugely important because you want to create dialogue and again, what I call a virtuous teaching cycle where the teacher learns from the students and vice versa. Which means everybody ought to be free to ask whatever is on their mind, whatever it will take to get clarity and understanding, but it is not the leader just coming in and freeform asking questions. I believe the leader has a responsibility for framing the discussion, for having as best they can a teachable point of view, they may need help from their people in flushing it out, but they need to set the stage but then it has to be a very interactive, what I call virtuous teaching cycle environment, teach learn, teach learn, teach learn.

To develop others...

- Make it part of your routine

A good example to me of an outstanding leader developing other leaders is Myrtle Potter who at the time I am commenting was Chief Operating Officer of Genentech running the commercial side of the business. And she would take time at the end of every single meeting and do some coaching of the whole team on how we could perform as a team better, and then she would often take individuals and say, could we spend 10 minutes over a cup of coffee, I want to give you some feedback and coaching on that report that you just presented on or how you are handling a particularly difficult human resource issue, but it was part of her regular routine. And I think the challenge for all of us as leaders is to make that a way of life and it is built into the fabric of how we lead and it is not a one off event, three times a year. It is happening almost every day.

To develop others...

- Make it a priority

One of the biggest challenges in getting people kind of on this path is to overcome some of their own resistance, either fear or the way I view the world I don't have time for this, everybody can make time. Roger Enrico is CEO of Pepsi. He didn't have time to go off for a week at a time and run training sessions. He had to readjust his calendar. So it requires you to look in the mirror and say, is this important. If it is important, of course I can make the time. Then I have to get over my own anxiety on how well I can do it, but it is a commitment to get on the path that says: this is how I am going to drive my own performance and the performance of my colleagues.

To develop others...

- Learn to teach

I think the biggest mistake is to assume you are going to be good at it right off the bat. It is like learning anything else. First time you go out and try and play tennis, good luck. But you got to stay with it and you got to engage your people in helping make you better and them better. And so it is a journey you need to get on, not I am going to do it perfectly when I start out.

If you want to be a great leader who is a great teacher, it's very simple. You have got to dive into the deep end of the pool. But you've got to dive into the pool with preparation. I don't want you drowning. I want you succeeding. It is extraordinarily rewarding for most human beings to teach others. I think once you can turn that switch on, it is self perpetuating. You get a lot of reinforcement, your team is better. You perform better because your performance goes up and it becomes this virtuous teaching cycle.

Your opportunity to develop others

We've heard why developing others can drive greater business results, and how to make the most of your leader-led development efforts. The materials provided in Develop Others enable you to create personalized learning experiences for YOUR team within the flow of their daily activities. Use the guides and projects to engage your team quickly. And to explore how key concepts apply to them in the context of their priorities and goals.

The value of teaching is the performance of the organization is totally dependent on making your people smarter and more aligned every day as the world changes. In the 21st century we are not going to get by with command and control. We are going to have to get by with knowledge creation. The way you create knowledge in an organization is you create these virtuous teaching cycles where you are teaching and learning simultaneously, responding to customer demands and changes, responding to changes in the global environment. My bottom line is if you're not teaching, you're not leading.

A leader's most important role in any organization is making good judgments — well informed, wise decisions about people, strategy and crises that produce the desired outcomes. When a leader shows consistently good judgment, little else matters. When he or she shows poor judgment nothing else matters. In addition to making their own good judgment calls, good leaders develop good judgment among their team members.

**Dr. Noel M. Tichy**

**Professor, University of Michigan Ross School of Business**

Dr. Noel M. Tichy is Professor of Management and Organizations, and Director of the Global Business Partnership at the University of Michigan Ross School of Business. The Global Business Partnership links companies and students around the world to develop and engage business leaders to incorporate global citizenship activities, both environmental projects and human capital development, for those at the bottom of the pyramid. Previously, Noel was head of General Electric's Leadership Center at Crotonville, where he led the transformation to action learning at GE. Between 1985 and 1987, he was Manager of Management Education for GE where he directed its worldwide development efforts at Crotonville. He currently consults widely in both the private and public sectors. He is a senior partner in Action Learning Associates. Noel is author of numerous books and articles, including:

For more information about Noel Tichy, visit <http://www.noeltichy.com>.

## Share an Idea

Leaders are in a unique position to recognize the ideas and tools that are most relevant and useful for their teams. If you only have a few minutes, consider sharing an idea or tool from this topic with your team or peers that is relevant and timely to their situation.

For example, consider sending one of the three recommended ideas or tools below to your team with your comments or questions on how the idea or tool can be of value to your organization. By simply sharing the item, you can easily engage others in important conversations and activities relevant to your goals and priorities.

[Steps for managing a difficult interaction](#)

[Tips for dissipating tension during a difficult conversation](#)

[Worksheet for finding the source of the difficulty](#)

To share an idea, tip, step, or tool with your comments via e-mail, select the EMAIL link in the upper right corner of the page that contains the idea, tip, step, or tool that you wish to share.

## Discussion 1: Recognizing when to take action

When dealing with difficult interactions, it's essential to recognize situations that need addressing — and to manage them promptly and effectively. However, knowing when to take action can be difficult to determine. Furthermore, team members might avoid dealing with difficult interactions because certain barriers get in the way.

Use these resources to lead a discussion with your team about recognizing when to take action to resolve difficult interactions in your workplace.

Download resources:

[Discussion Invitation: Recognizing When to Take Action](#)

[Discussion Guide: Recognizing When to Take Action](#)

[Discussion Slides: Recognizing When to Take Action \(optional\)](#)

[Tips for Preparing for and Leading the Discussion](#)

The discussion you have with your team will help them invest their time and energy wisely on those important relationships that have the best chance of being improved.

Working through the discussion guide can take up to 45 minutes. If you prefer a shorter 15- or 30-minute session, you may want to focus only on those concepts and activities most relevant to your situation.

## Discussion 2: Resolving difficult interactions

For difficult interactions that you or team members have decided are worth tackling, you will all need to leverage techniques for simultaneously getting at the facts behind the situation, understanding the emotions involved, and framing the problem in productive ways.

Use these resources to lead a discussion with your team on how to have effective conversations that resolve difficult interactions in your workplace.

Download resources:

[Discussion Invitation: Resolving Difficult Interactions](#)

[Discussion Guide: Resolving Difficult Interactions](#)

[Discussion Slides: Resolving Difficult Interactions \(optional\)](#)

[Tips for Preparing for and Leading the Discussion](#)

The discussion you have with your team will help empower your direct reports to resolve their conflicts on their own, and maintain productive relationships throughout the organization.

Working through this discussion guide can take up to 45 minutes. If you prefer a shorter 15- or 30-

minute session, you may want to focus only on those concepts and activities most relevant to your situation.

## Start a Group Project

Just like any change effort, successfully incorporating new skills and behaviors into one's daily activities and habits takes time and effort. After reviewing or discussing the concepts in this topic, your direct reports will still need your support to fully apply new concepts and skills. They will need to overcome a variety of barriers including a lack of time, lack of confidence, and a fear of making mistakes. They will also need opportunities to hone their skills and break old habits. To help ensure their success, you can provide safe opportunities for individuals and your team as a whole to practice and experiment with new skills and behaviors on the job.

For example, to encourage the adoption of new norms, you can provide your team members with coaching, feedback, and additional time to complete tasks that require the use of new skills. Management approaches such as these will encourage team members to experiment with new skills until they become proficient.

Group learning projects provide another valuable technique for accelerating team members' development of new behaviors. A group learning project is an on-the-job activity aimed at providing team members with direct experience implementing their new knowledge and skills. Through a learning project, team members discover how new concepts work in the context of their situation, while simultaneously having a direct and tangible impact on the organization.

The documents below provide steps, tips, and a template for initiating a group learning project with your team, along with two project recommendations for this topic.

Download resources:

[Tips for Initiating and Supporting a Learning Project](#)  
[Learning Project Plan Template](#)  
[Learning Project: Improve Your Conflict Management Style](#)  
[Learning Project: Resolve a Difficult Interaction](#)

## Tension in Teams

[Jim King. "Tension in Teams." \*Harvard Management Update\*, January 2009.](#)

[Download file](#)

### Summary

Conflict within teams is inevitable. And that's a good thing, because conflict is essential to the creative collaboration that is a team's *raison d'être*. Without differences of opinion, there can be no debate over important issues or a creative synthesis of ideas. So how can you, as a team leader, manage conflict to get the best out of your team? This article offers several suggestions: (1) Set up ground rules, in advance, for handling conflict; (2) Build cohesion and trust by providing opportunities for team members to get to know one another on a personal level; (3) When conflict arises, focus on the facts and make sure those involved fully understand each other's point of view; (4) Model the behavior you'd like others on your team to exhibit in the face of conflict; and (5) Intercede if the conflict

between team members becomes personal. Your ultimate goal is self-governance: once team members learn how to handle conflicts on their own, those same conflicts will contribute to the team's success.

## Create Value Out of Conflict

Robert C. Bordone and Michael L. Moffitt. "Create Value Out of Conflict." *Negotiation Newsletter*, June 2009.

[Download file](#)

### Summary

Too often, managers treat the everyday disputes that arise in the course of business as distinct from other aspects of business deal making. But savvy business leaders know better. In this article, you'll learn about six strategies for seizing value-creation opportunities that work as well in disputes as they do in deals.

## Gen Y in the Workforce

Tamara J. Erickson, Ron Alsop, Pamela Nicholson, and Jim Miller. "Gen Y in the Workforce." *Harvard Business Review*, February 2009.

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### Summary

Josh Lewis, a young staffer at Rising Entertainment, is frustrated because his boss, marketing chief Sarah Bennett, won't listen to his ideas about using new media to promote films. She's trapped in the 1990s, he thinks, when people actually watched network TV! Rushing through his assignment for a team presentation, he works up a plan and pitches it to the CEO in the hallway. The CEO loves it, but Sarah is upset with Josh for going over her head—and submitting subpar work on the presentation. How can these members of two different generations work together effectively? Three experts comment on this fictional case study. Clashes between impatient Generation Y and pay-your-dues Generation X are inevitable but certainly manageable, says Ron Alsop, author of *The Trophy Kids Grow Up*. For starters, Sarah should reprimand Josh for bypassing her; he should respect her authority and work with her, not around her. But Sarah must address Josh's frustrations. Like many Gen Yers, he wants to know that his work is meaningful, and he needs constructive feedback on suggestions. Enterprise Rent-A-Car president Pamela Nicholson says that given the CEO's enthusiasm, Sarah should commend Josh's initiative but remind him to keep her in the loop. Sarah and Josh also might be able to forge a more productive relationship if Rising Entertainment set up training and feedback programs to help integrate Gen Yers into the workforce, as Enterprise has. Jim Miller, an executive VP at General Tool & Supply, thinks Josh put his team in jeopardy by doing his assigned tasks poorly. Sarah needs to coach him on being a team player and set clear expectations about performance and communication. However, she could have done a much better job of validating his good idea—perhaps by asking him to spearhead some experiments for the group.